

Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

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1979 Circus

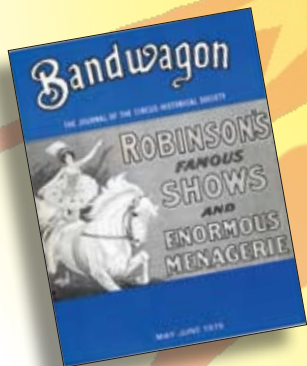


HISTORY

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Joe Bradbury, John Daniel Draper, Stuart Thayer, Kenneth Hull, Richard Flint, Gordon Carver and John Lentz were among the authors.

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Bandwagon

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2018 Volume 62, Number 3

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From the Editor

Elephants Never Forget

I have a confession to make. For the entirety of my life – for which memory serves me – I have been in love with the incredible grey titans of the circus. My father took me to see Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey when it played inavenport, Iowa in 1954. Although I was only four years old, I still remember being spellbound as I looked down the long lineup of elephants swaying from side to side in the round end of the big top.¹

I continue to hold on to heart-warming memories of elephants I was around as a kid, but it does not stop there. I also have great appreciation for the elephants I have observed as an adult, and those I worked around for 30 seasons at Circus World Museum. Moreover, I have found a handful of elephants noted in the pages of circus history to be extremely intriguing.

An example is Babylon, one of the first two elephants acquired by the Ringling brothers during their wagon show days.² This legendary elephant was born c. 1877 in the wilds of Asia.³ She was captured two or three years later, given the name Babe, and transferred to the Zoological Society of London at Regents Park where Jumbo at the time was giving rides to British schoolchildren. Babe was sold to Burr Robbins Circus in 1880, and crossed the Atlantic a short

time before Jumbo made the same journey. In America, she appeared on Great Pacific, Hilliard & Main, Dan Costello's Circus, and Sells Bros. – all before her sale to the Ringlings in early 1888. It is not known when she was first called Babylon, but it was not long before Ringling elephant men reverted to Babe.

Just imagine an elephant that walked in the pre-dawn light over country roads to each new stand, and then rode the rails for decades with the largest circus of all time. That was Babe. I began writing here about my own memories of elephants, but think of the recollections this elephant might have had. Think of the set-ups and



With Babe, left to right: Sam Gumpertz, William. M. Mann (Director of the National Zoo), Robert Ringling, unknown man, and W. H. Blackburne (also with the National Zoo).

Circus World Museum



This illustration is from an 1890 Ringling Bros. herald.

Circus World Museum

tear-downs she was part of, and the thousands of times she heard the big show band. From crossing the Brooklyn Bridge to passing through the Rockies, from hearing the audience count Leitzel's swing-overs to feeling the concussion of Zacchini's cannon, Babe was there for it all.

Recently, I came across the accompanying photo taken on the Ringling lot in Washington, D.C. on May 16, 1934. It records the occasion when Babe, a.k.a. Babylon, was presented to the National Zoo following 55 years of faithful service trouping with American circuses. After only three years of retirement, she died in the nation's capital on August 12, 1937.⁴

Whether or not an elephant has the capacity to hold on to specific memories of earlier years, one thing is certain. For those of us who were exposed to their majesty at one time or another, they will never be forgotten.

– GTP

1. In 1954, the menagerie including the elephant lineup, was located in one end of the big top.
2. Babylon, a large female Asian elephant, and Fannie, a female African elephant were purchased by the Ringlings from Sells Bros. Circus in early 1888 (*Baraboo Republic*, March 14, 1888).
3. The estimated birth year and the subsequent transfer and ownership information in this paragraph are documented in the *Asian Elephant North American Regional Studbook* (Portland: Oregon Zoo and Association of Zoos and Aquariums, 2010 edition, p. 85).
4. Ibid.

Polar Bears on the Covers

Circus posters needed few words to describe the majestic nature of a show's polar bears. The giant, completely white arctic animals ideally contrasted with a cobalt blue background or a much smaller nearby trainer, such depictions easily commanding the public's attention.

earliest confirmation of a polar bear's appearance with a travelling show in the United States was one on Purdy, Welch & Co.'s Menagerie in 1833 (Stuart Thayer, *Bandwagon*, Nov./Dec. 1991, p. 64).

Throughout the 20th century, polar bear acts highlighted circus performances on both sides of the Atlantic. Willy Hagenbeck presented no less than 70 of the carnivorous mammals on Paul Busch Circus in Berlin in 1904.

Zirkus Aeros dwarfs a female trainer. The state-run circus was based in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). The woman was Ursula Bottcher who began presenting polar bears in 1958. Those who were fortunate enough to have seen her sensational act on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's Blue Unit would likely agree that she and her bears were undeniably center ring stars.

— GTP



Erie Lithograph & Printing Co. produced this 16-sheet poster c. 1927.

Circus World Museum

The artwork on *Bandwagon's* front cover was apparently offered to Sells Brothers Enormous United Shows between 1892 and 1895 when that enterprise included one or two polar bears in its menagerie. This striking artwork dates from that four-year span. The printing company that created the design is not certain. However, the same graphic was still available for an eight-sheet poster configuration decades later as evidenced by a U. S. Printing Company sample book (Circus World Museum, Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center, SBK 70, c. 1939).

Sells Bros. exhibited a pair of polar bears as early as 1881 (*Green Bay Gazette*, May 9, 1881, p. 4 and many other contemporary newspapers), but it was not the first enterprise to do so. The

Clyde Beatty entered the steel-bound arena with the magnificent creatures on Gollmar Bros. Circus in 1922, and he worked as many as 14 polar bears on John Robinson Circus and Hagenbeck-Wallace before moving on to lions and tigers. Theodore Schroeder, Alfred Court and Albert Rix were among the many trainers associated with the awe-inspiring white bears.

On the back cover, the monstrous denizen of the arctic that dominates this 1967 poster for

Ringling-Barnum producers Irvin Feld and Kenneth Feld signed Ursula Bottcher to present her polar bears in America in 1974.

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey photograph





As any photographer who has ever been to Sarasota knows, the Florida Gulf Coast is the perfect location for anyone with a camera. Dazzling sunlight along with exceptional subject matter makes the Sarasota area a remarkable setting for spectacular photographs, and when it came to photographs of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey winter quarters, perhaps no one compiled a more comprehensive collection of stunning images than Joseph Janey Steinmetz.

Joe Steinmetz was born in Philadelphia in 1905 and received his first Brownie box camera on his seventh birthday. From that point on, the spark was lit. After graduating from Princeton in 1927, he took a trip around the world, where in Cairo he bought a Leica camera. It was a purchase that would change his life.

Despite the challenges of The Great Depression, Steinmetz became a successful photographer in Philadelphia, and by the time he and his wife arrived in Sarasota in 1939, his work had appeared in national magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, *Look*, *Time*, *Holiday* and *Colliers*.

In 1941 *Life* magazine assigned the Sarasota photographer to document the new circus that was being created by Norman Bel Geddes, the futuristic designer who would change everything from the color of the tents and sawdust to providing designs for costumes and posters. With that magazine assignment, Steinmetz began his long love-affair with the Sarasota winter quarters, and by the time the circus moved to Venice two decades later, his lens had captured hundreds of dazzling scenes of performers, animals, executives and trains, all under the brilliant Florida sunshine.

Joe Steinmetz died in 1985 at the age of 80, and in 2011 a portfolio of 5,000 negatives created over his lifetime was donated to the Florida State Archives. Nearly 600 of the photographs deal with circus themes and are available online at www.floridamemory.com

The Winter



This steam engine of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad was photographed pulling the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus train on the final run of the 1947 season. The 56-

Quarters Photographs of Joseph Steinmetz

by Chris Berry

photos from the State Archives of Florida/Steinmetz unless noted



mile route, from Tampa to Sarasota, took the train through an unspoiled section of the Florida Gulf Coast. Although the Atlantic Coast Line had begun transitioning from steam to

diesel in 1940, the railroad continued to operate locomotives such as this one until 1953, as well as other models until 1955.



In 1940 Sarasota had a population of about 11,000 people, which swelled to more than 30,000 during the winter of 1940-41. In addition to spectacular beaches and the lure of mild winter weather, visitors flocked to the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art and the circus winter quarters, two of the first tourist destinations on the west coast of Florida.

This early aerial photograph was taken by Joe Steinmetz several months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. In the coming years, tourism in Sarasota and at the winter quarters would explode because of the increasingly mobile nature of America during the strong post-war economy.

When John Ringling North purchased M'Toto from Mrs. Maria Hoyt in 1941, her trainer José Tomas was part of the package. Tomas said that unlike Gargantua, M'Toto was very affectionate and loved playing with kittens, riding a tricycle, and dressing herself in stockings, dresses and shoes.

Steinmetz took this photo of Tomas and M'Toto at the Sarasota winter quarters in 1941, about the same time as the celebrated "wedding" between the two gorillas on February 22. According to Tomas, M'Toto was smitten with Gargantua, but despite her flirting, the 600-pound Gargantua never returned her affections.





One of the standout features of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus of the 1940s was Russian aerialist Elly Ardely, seen here at winter quarters. Known for her trademark headstand on the trapeze, Ardely was one of 12 new European acts contracted by John Ringling North during a talent scouting trip in December 1939. After signing her, North cabled his brother Henry in Sarasota, "She'll make 'em forget Leitzel."



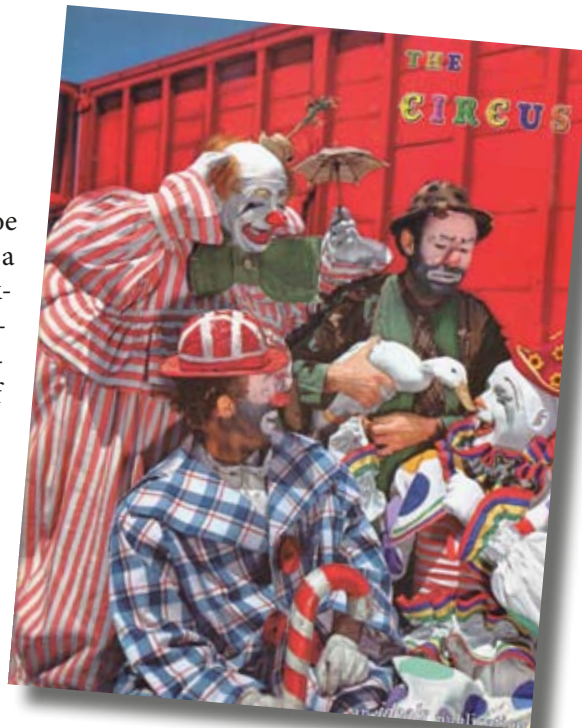
When the Al G. Barnes Sells-Floto circus closed at the end of the 1938 season, elephant trainer Walter McClain moved to Sarasota and became superintendent of the Ringling herd which he managed until his accidental death in 1942. He is seen here putting some of the elephants through their paces at a Sunday performance at the Sarasota winter quarters.

In January of 1942, nine of the Barnes elephants that had remained in California doing motion picture work were shipped to Sarasota, increasing the herd there to more than 50.

Although Joe Steinmetz was a master of black-and-white photography, the colorful makeup of Felix Adler, Emmett Kelly, Harry Dann and Paul Jerome made for a stunning image against a baggage wagon that sported a fresh coat of

"Ringling Red" paint. This

photograph of four of the most identifiable clowns of the era was taken March 21, 1947. It was reproduced as shown here in 1961 as the cover of a magazine and hardcover book devoted to the circus and published by Ideals.



While the circus was in winter quarters during the winter of 1940-1941, Joe Steinmetz took a series of photographs of four-year old Carla Wallenda watching as a young Lou Jacobs put on his makeup and transformed himself into one of the most recognized clowns in American circus history. Over the years, Steinmetz took many photographs of the Wallenda family during backyard rehearsals and performances.



Joe Steinmetz was on hand on the morning of Sunday November 23, 1947 when the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey canvas crew put up the big top for the final date of the season. Although the original plan was to set up the show at the circus winter quarters, only days before the circus arrived a change was made to the lot and the show was set up at a vacant lot on Ringling Boulevard, just east of the Sarasota Terrace Hotel, which is seen in the background.

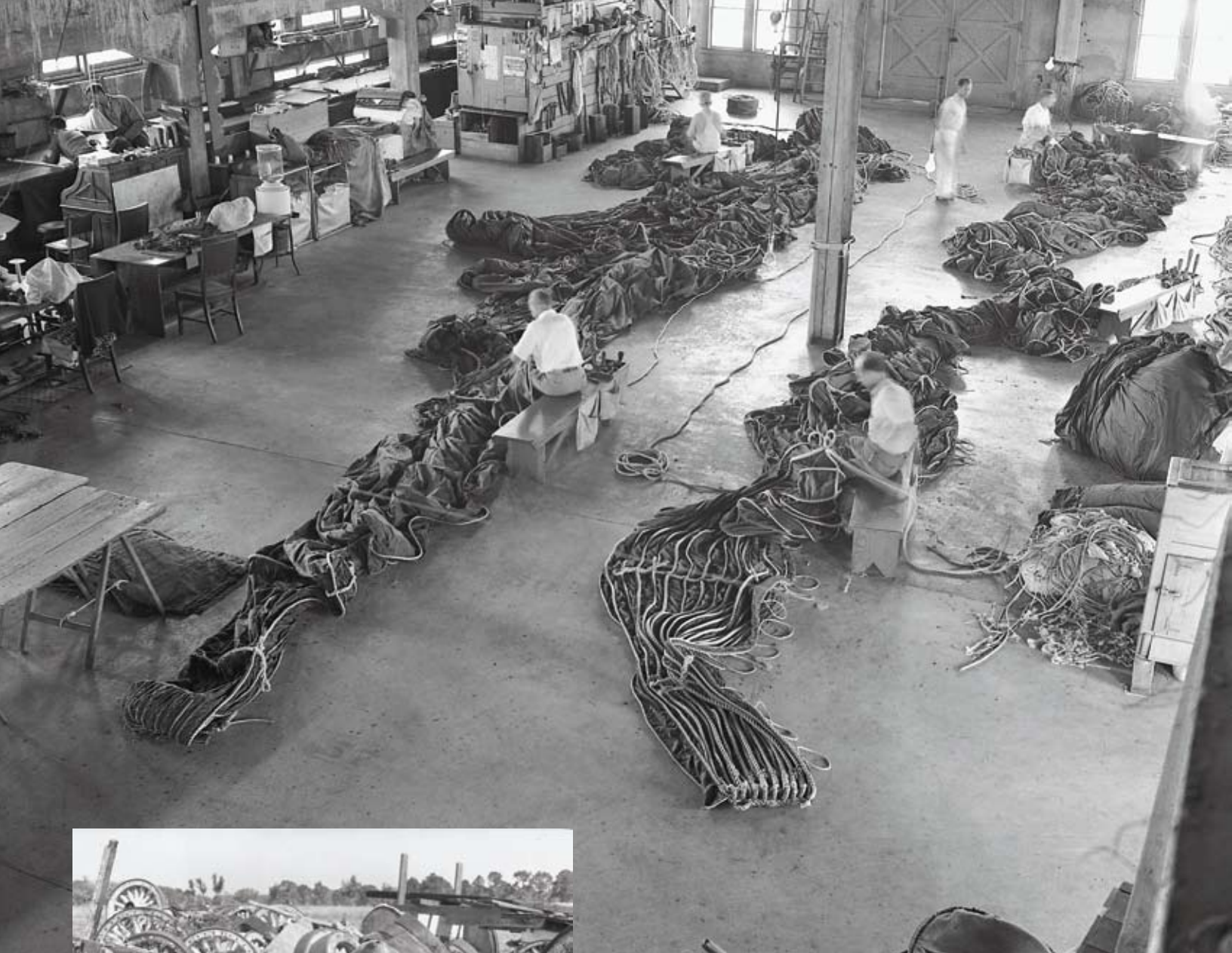
The Terrace Hotel had been built by Charles Ringling in 1925, just one year prior to his death, and was later renamed the Sarasota Motor Hotel. The building is now owned by Sarasota County and is named the Terrace Administration Building, an homage to its previous role as one of the city's first high-rise hotels.





Sarasota became a major tourist destination on Florida's Gulf Coast in great measure because of the theme-park environment that existed at the circus winter quarters in the 1950s. This aerial photograph shows the circus property near

the present intersection of Beneva and Fruitville Roads, as it looked during the filming of *The Greatest Show on Earth* in February of 1951.



In the late 1930s and early 1940s, some – up to 40 people – were assigned to the “Sail Loft” at the Sarasota winter quarters. While the show was getting ready for the next season’s tour, these skilled workers prepared the canvas that would be used in the coming months. The multitude of tents that were stitched together required about 17-acres to accommodate the canvas city. More than 80 miles of rope was also required to construct the big top and smaller tents.



Joe Steinmetz and Emmett Kelly were close friends for over 40 years, and several iconic photographs of “Weary Willie” were taken by Steinmetz in the 1940s and 1950s.

By the late 1930s the sunburst wagon wheels that had been colorful accessories on many of the circus wagons, were being replaced with pneumatic tires, and the wooden-spoked wheels were discarded in a boneyard at the Sarasota winter quarters. Steinmetz and Kelly created this nostalgic scene in 1947, with Kelly’s sad-faced tramp creating a poignant and memorable moment in time.



In the winter of 1939, John Ringling North toured war-torn Europe in hopes of finding acts that had been displaced by Hitler's blitzkrieg. Among those he signed to a contract was French animal trainer Alfred Court, whose mixed animal act included lions, tigers, polar bears, leopards and pumas, not to mention a couple of educated Great Danes. Some of the wild animals are seen here being moved from their animal house into transfer cages that would be used during the upcoming season.

Alfred Court's animals arrived in Sarasota from Copenhagen on January 1, 1940, and according to news reports the new menagerie taxed the capacity of the quarters to house wild animals, and "as is the case of unexpected company, they doubled up with some of the better behaved old timers."



As elephant superintendent from 1938 until 1942, Walter McClain used his herd for a variety of tasks that had previously been performed by horses. In a national wire service article written by reporter and later circus author Gene Plowden, it was said that during the 1940 season draft horses had been entirely replaced by McClain's herd of 40 elephants, and that by using them to move wagons in the rail yards and on the circus lot they were able to do the work of 300 horses. This photograph shows several elephants loading wagons at the Sarasota winter quarters in advance of the 1941 tour.

both photographs on this page
from Circus World Museum

Before the days of television and interstate travel, big metropolitan zoos were few and far between. For most Americans, exotic animals were only seen in the menageries of traveling circuses. In 1941, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey menagerie featured not only performing elephants and cages of wild animals, but also Mr. and Mrs. Gargantua and a score of other beasts including camels, apes, and llamas.

This scene from early 1941 shows dromedaries and Bactrian camels, being led to stock cars which took them to New York, where they were displayed in the basement of Madison Square Garden. Enroute to the opening performance that season, one of the camels delivered a calf that was discovered when the stock car was opened during a



watering stop. Photographs of the baby camel were distributed nationwide, with the New York newspapers promoting it as a new and added attraction.

Circus World Museum



By the early 1940s John and Henry Ringling North had completed several seasons managing the circus, and as the show train was preparing to depart on March 31, 1941, their mother Ida Ringling North, came to the winter quarters from her mansion on Bird Key to see the circus off.

In his book *The Circus Kings*, Henry Ringling North wrote of how, even after he was a grown man, his mother would caution him to, "Be very careful of those tracks Buddy," when she would bid him farewell at the beginning of the season.



Residents of the Sarasota area went downtown to the Atlantic Coast Line depot at the end of Main Street to observe the departure of the circus train for the spring opener at Madison Square Garden. The depot, a Mission-style white stucco building partially seen at the left in this photo, was built in 1925. Two years later when John Ringling relocated his circus to the Gulf Coast community, the railroad tracks were extended approximately two miles to the east and slightly north to the winter quarters property.

Wagons, animals and other equipment were loaded on the sections of the Ringling-Barnum train at the winter quarters. That was also the location where many of the

performers, executives and working men boarded the train each year from 1928 until 1956. The annual event was a scene of organized chaos that Cecil B. DeMille captured on film as the circus prepared to pull out of winter quarters for the 1951 season.

A close observer of *The Greatest Show on Earth* will catch a quick glimpse of photographer Joe Steinmetz during the scene when Cornell Wilde arrives at the winter quarters in a speeding convertible. You can see Steinmetz and his camera for a brief moment just after “Brad” tells the police officers that the circus will pay any traffic fines incurred by “The Great Sebastian.”

State Archives of Florida/Steinmetz



In a scene also captured on film by Cecil B. DeMille in *The Greatest Show on Earth*, Father Charles L. Elslander and two acolytes are seen sprinkling holy water and blessing the circus train on March 29, 1948, just prior to the departure for the season opener at Madison Square Garden.

Father Elslander was a pastor at St. Martha's Parish near the winter quarters from 1927 until his death at the age of 85 in 1977. It was in 1939 that John Ringling North first requested that Father Elslander bless the train before starting the tour, an annual tradition that continued through the 2017 season.



This photograph from October 19, 1953 shows John Ringling North in the Jomar, the private car built by the Pullman Company for his uncle John in 1917. The 83-foot railroad car originally had a Victorian interior with mahogany paneling, Tiffany lamps, and custom-made china, but by 1940 it had been remodeled by North and reflected a more contemporary design, including modern furnishings and central air conditioning.

While on assignment for *Life* magazine in the spring of 1941, Joe Steinmetz was invited to ride on the Jomar from Sarasota to New York, no doubt starting a friendship with John Ringling North that continued, allowing him access to the circus and winter quarters in the coming years.

During his time in Sarasota Joe Steinmetz was allowed into areas that were typically off-limits to the public as well as most of those who were associated with the circus. This photograph from about 1941 shows the interior of the recently renovated Jomar.

The remodeling that was completed in 1940, changed dark mahogany to a natural finished wood in a setting of pale green and cream. The renovated Jomar included a new row of staterooms, including a full-sized bathroom and small dining alcove adorned by a painting of Lady Godiva dismounting her horse.

The mural was painted by Charles Baskerville, a prominent portrait artist who created the cover art for each of the Ringling-Barnum circus programs from 1951 through 1955. Baskerville also designed the artwork that appeared on official letterheads, route cards, posters, and that decorated wagons and railroad coaches with slight variation from the 1940s through 2017.

This photograph, taken enroute to New York from Sarasota in the spring of 1941, is in stark contrast to the luxurious Jomar or even the staterooms assigned to many of the featured performers of the circus. Personal space was nonexistent in the workingmen's sleepers, with bunks stacked three high, sometimes two men to a bed. These crowded conditions were necessary to provide sleeping accommodations for the hundreds of workingmen who were responsible for building the tent city each day, along with those who sold concessions or cared for the scores of animals with the circus.

Even though every man was assigned to a bunk, many of the workers would find it more comfortable to ride outside on a flatcar rather than deal with the inevitable issues that would arise from living in such close quarters. **BW**



Jennie Rooney

The beauty of the circus

by Julie Parkinson

Jennie Rooney was not originally from Baraboo nor did she come from a famous circus family with an equestrian background as her last name might suggest. In fact, at the turn of the century, 6-year-old Jennie Smith was an orphan, with no education, living in a small town in northern Wisconsin. Though as time would tell, she would become a genuine American sweetheart amazing audiences with her aerial talents. She would also become known as “The Beauty of the Circus”¹, starring with *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

Jennie Smith was born in 1894 to Perry and Amy Sweet Smith in Black Creek, Wisconsin. Not much is known about her early life or how she became an orphan. However, she was given to her Aunt Nettie who was married to Johnny Hines,² leader of the Hines-Kimble acrobatic troupe, and they took Jennie with them as they toured with various traveling shows.

Jennie made her performing debut in 1905 on the Van Amburg Show. She appeared with a troupe consisting of five men and four children. Performing alongside Jennie, was her cousin of the same age, Mayme Ward who was also an orphan. Jennie and the other children in the act were thrown into the air, somersaulting to be caught on the shoulders of an adult. Then the young performer would do another somersault from that man’s shoulders and land on the ground or on another man’s shoulders. Sometimes, the young performers were cast to the top mounter position on a three-high column. Later the troupe appeared on the Norris and Rowe Circus (1908 and 1909), Sparks Circus (1910), and in 1911 they went on the Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Circus that was owned and operated by the Ringling brothers. During these years, Jennie and her cousin Mayme, were often billed as “The Kimball Sisters”, performing a double trapeze act. Also around that time, Jennie started performing a cloud swing routine.

Johnny Hines did not allow the children in the troupe to go to school. The troupe wintered back in Black Creek, Wisconsin, a town of about 500 residents, just north of Eau Claire. It was there that officials discovered that the circus children had never attended school. That changed imme-

*The Empress of the Cloud
Swing, Jennie Rooney.*

Fred D. Pfening Archive



Jennie Rooney posed for this photograph in E. B. Trimpey's studio in Baraboo, Wisconsin, c. 1913.

Circus World Museum



Jennie Rooney during the prime of her career as a Ringling aerialist.
Circus World Museum



Ed and Jennie Rooney in E. B. Trimpey's Baraboo, Wisconsin studio, c. 1913.
Circus World Museum

diately. Subsequently, Hines had to accept them going to school when they were in Black Creek, but if Jennie was caught reading a book, the troop leader would make her practice even more.³

Jennie remembered that back in the early 1900s, troupe bosses were often very mean and cruel to their kids. If Jennie did not do a trick the way that Johnny Hines wanted her to, she would get hit with a strap, her uncle's fist, or maybe something else. One day Jennie did not do the act as Hines



The Hines-Kimball troupe c. 1909; standing are Mayme Ward, Garret Smith, Jennie Smith (Rooney), and unknown female; seated are unknown male, Guy Baldwin, Nettie Hines, and Johnny Hines.
Circus World Museum

expected and she came out of the back door rushing toward the dressing room, because she knew she "was gonna get it." She started running and Hines threw one of his "swap shoes" (wooden clogs) at her. It hit her in the back and knocked her down on her face. Everyone who was around in the backyard ran to help her. After that, a big Irish man stood at the back door while the act was on, and when the act was over he would walk Jennie to the dressing room. Johnny Hines no longer dared to do anything abusive to Jennie. That was the last season that Jennie spent with the Hines-Kimball troupe. She got married just as soon as she could.⁴

Jennie was 16 years old when the Hines-Kimball troupe had joined the Forepaugh-Sells show in what was to be the show's last year in existence. Also on the show that year, was young Edward Rooney doing his trapeze act and equestrian riding. At that time, there were strict rules when it came to the unmarried performers "keeping company" with each other. If you were caught, you would be fined.⁵ Nevertheless, it was love at first sight when the Rooneys joined the show in the spring. Ed and Jennie "were hit pretty hard"⁶, and so Ed gave considerable thought to figure out a way to talk to her. The section of the parade that Jennie rode in consisted of 12 couples – each pair riding white horses, wearing a different color velvet costume, with silver spangles and ostrich feather plumes.⁷ Ed persuaded Jennie's riding partner in the yellow velvet to trade costumes with him, so he would be able to ride next to Jennie. It was during those daily street parades

that they were able to get to know one another. They talked for two to three hours, day after day through the spring, summer and into fall. Then on October 27 in Valdosta, Georgia, where the laws permitted marriages at a younger age, Ed went into town with some other men to obtain a marriage license. After the matinee, Jennie “slipped off the lot,” met them at the Justice of the Peace and they were married.⁸

Later that night on the train, Jennie went to Hines’ sleeping car and told her uncle and his wife that she had married Ed Rooney earlier that day. Hines was anything but happy for the young couple and threatened to throw Jennie off the train. No one on the train could sleep that night because everyone was waiting to see if Johnny was going to “red light” Jennie from the train. Later Charles Ringling learned about the threat and told Hines to “knock it off, or else.”⁹ Jennie noted in her later years that Johnny Hines “died later in an insane asylum.”¹⁰

After Jennie and Ed got married, they decided it made more sense for him to learn the skills required for a double trapeze act, than for her to learn to ride horses. This was because they would have had to buy the horses and supplies, and they would also have had the added responsibility of taking care of the animals. Jennie later said, “You can’t learn bareback in six weeks; it was easier for Ed to learn trapeze.”¹¹

After the 1911 season ended on Forepaugh-Sells, Jennie went to Baraboo for the first time. During the months at the Ringling Bros. winter quarters she and Ed lived with Ed’s parents at 722 East Street. They rehearsed their double trapeze high in the elephant barn on Water Street, sometimes while the elephants were practicing below. On occasion, they would look down and one of the young elephants would be walking around freely underneath them. Sometimes they would take a swing at Jennie with their trunks. Although they were likely just playing around, she was terrified of them. Sometimes when Ed and Jennie were



The Rooneys were newlyweds performing with the Ringling Bros. show when this photo recorded Jennie’s cloud swing presented as a free act high above the circus midway.
Circus World Museum



Jennie's own life was a Cinderella story of sorts, rising from being an orphan to circus royalty. These two press photographs show her portraying the title character in the circus spec.

Circus World Museum

practicing, the young elephants were put through their routines. The trainers would later claim that the little elephants had refused to do their tricks when Jennie was not around.

In the double trapeze act that Ed and Jennie performed, they did planges, half somersaults to a wrist-to-wrist catch, the toe swing, and they did a routine on the lower bar, sometimes working nearly 50 feet in the air. Then Jennie would hang by the instep of one of her feet on Ed's neck. The act ended with the heart-stopping breakaway. Ed stated much later after his performing years were finished that, "It was a short act, only six minutes, but we worked fast."¹² In a patriotic gesture during the First World War, the act was referred to as the "Made in America Act." Performing also with her daring cloud swing act, Jennie earned the title, "Empress of the Cloud Swing."¹³

Through the years on the Ringling Bros. Circus and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Jennie Rooney also appeared in some amazing roles in the show's spectacles, including portraying a princess in the spec, *In Days of Old* (1918), and performing in a featured role in the *Durbar of Delhi* (1933-1937). She was in grand productions such as *Joan of Arc* (1912-1913) and *Solomon and the Queen of Sheeba* (1914-1915).) Without a doubt, however, the most impressive and remarkable role that she played was when

she was chosen to portray Cinderella in the lead role of the Ringling Bros. spectacle (1916-1917). "The Beauty of the Circus" was indeed the undisputed star of the Cinderella spec.

Long after she retired from the circus, Jennie recalled one of the only times she had to perform with horses:

"In Days of Old I had to stand on a platform. Dave Costello...was the knight. He'd ride on his horse from one end of the big top down to the other end and he'd pass this platform and he was supposed to rescue me. I was Roslyn or whatever. He'd grab me around the waist and pick me off there on the galloping horse... which was not easy to do."¹⁴

Jennie did not have her own dressing room, as did her friend Lillian Leitzel. She dressed with more than 60 other women, although she had a nice space and could have whoever she wanted sit by her. She had two buckets of water, one to wash with and one to rinse. Sometimes in the dressing room she would join others and play bridge, but on the one-day stands, they did not have a lot of time to leave the lot to explore the town.¹⁵

Jennie adored her friend Lillian Leitzel, who autographed a photo to Jennie that said, "To a great little per-



Jennie Smith, an acrobat and aerialist, married into the famous Rooney family. She never appeared in any of the Rooney equestrian acts, but did ride horses in street parades and certain Ringling productions. Here she poses with the "famous circus horse, Tom with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey" c. 1920.

Circus World Museum



Likely waiting for the spec to begin, Jennie Rooney poses with an unknown child in the Cinderella Carriage in 1916.

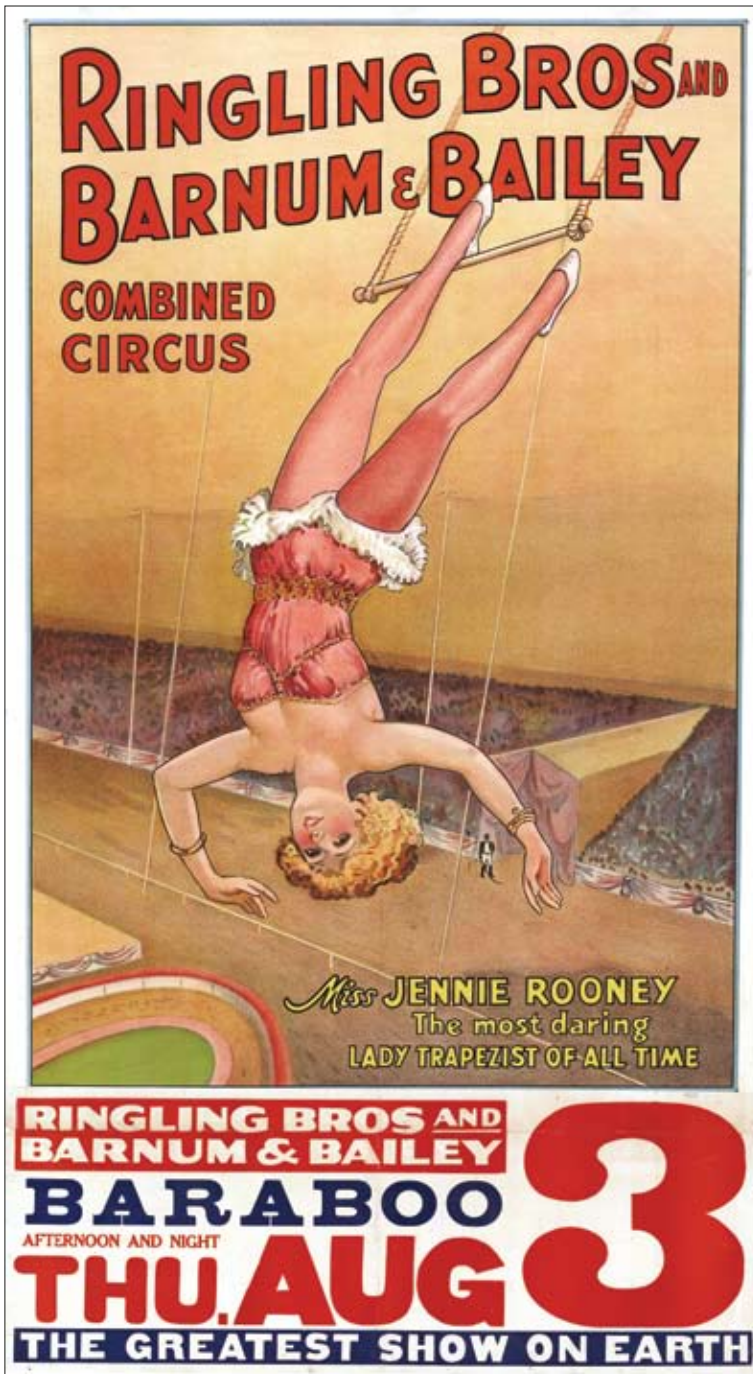
Circus World Museum



Jennie Rooney was selected by the Ringling brothers for the lead role in their magnificent 1916-1917 spectacle. This poster dating from 1917 depicted the scene when

Cinderella lost her slipper on the palace staircase just as the clock was striking midnight.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



This 1933 poster is misleading as it shows Jennie Rooney on a single trapeze when in fact she always performed with her husband on their double trapeze or on a cloud swing rope.

Chris Berry Collection

former, my ideal circus girl. To Jennie Rooney from Lillian Leitzel." Jennie thought that she was wonderful and not like anyone else in the circus.¹⁶ Leitzel and Jennie Rooney were both favorites of the Ringling brothers, Charles Ringling in particular.¹⁷ Jennie was known for more than just her good looks and agility in the air. "In the air, in the grand entry as 'Cinderella', in the cloud swing and in double traps, Jenny Rooney is one of the most charming personalities in the entire circus, or circus world for that matter. And she is a



Harry Atwell photograph of Jennie and Ed Rooney, c. 1925.

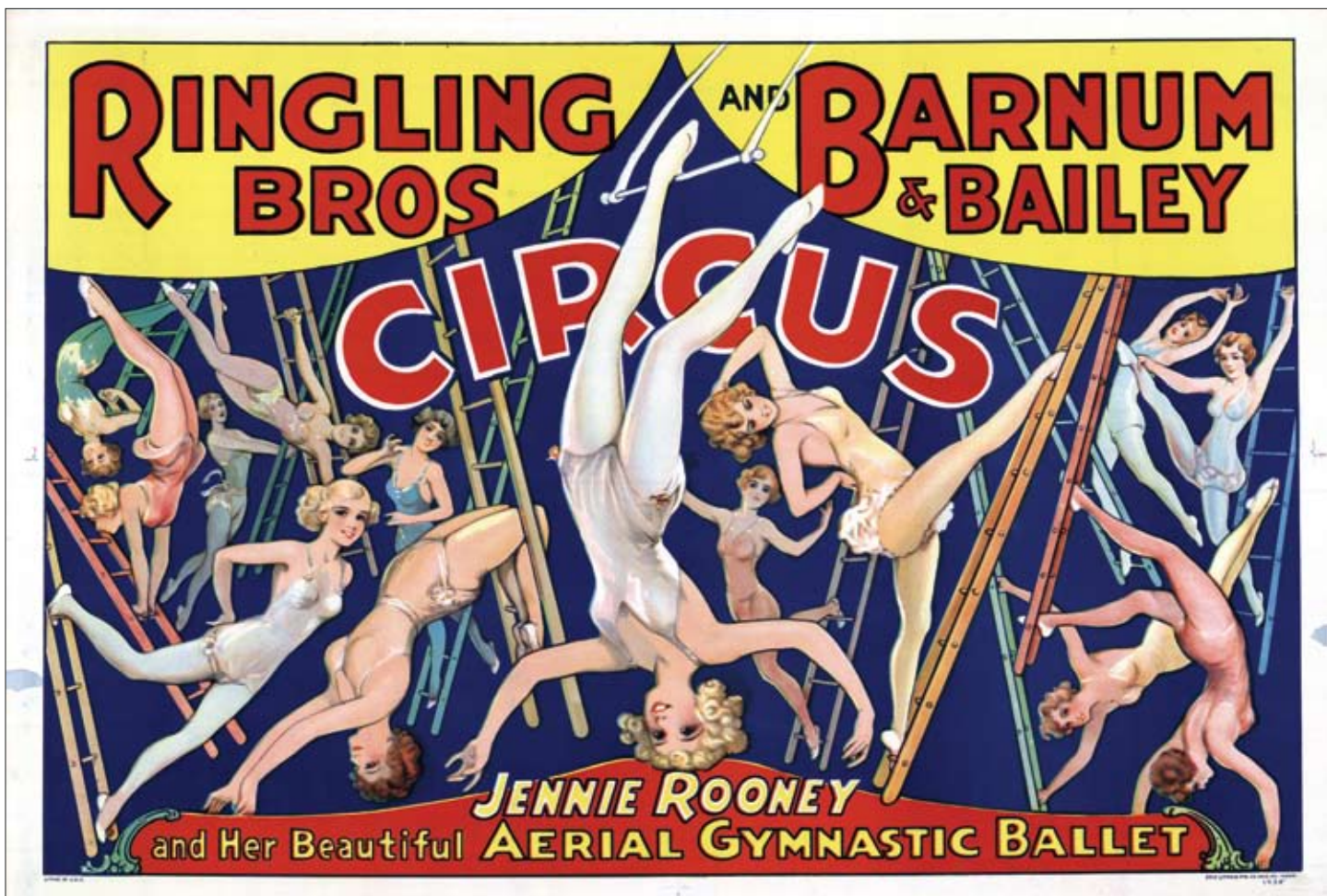
Circus World Museum

beautiful creature too."¹⁸

Jennie knew Al, John and Charles Ringling very well, and she said you were either a "Charlie person" or a "John person." Jennie recalled in her later years that she and Ed were "definitely Charlie people."

Jennie and Ed were hired by Charles Ringling in 1912 earning a mere \$40 per week,¹⁹ and they stayed on the show through the 1940 season, minus the few years when they worked vaudeville, Hollywood and on European shows. Their contracts in the late 1920s and the 1930s, recorded that they received \$250 a week for their trapeze act and other appearances in the show, and that included their little 6 x 8 foot stateroom on the train and meals.²⁰ Jennie said later in life that they could have gotten a higher salary if she had asked and complained, but back then she was not the squeaky wheel that she was later in life.

Their relationship with the Charles Ringling family went deeper than just contracts and rehearsals. Charles Ringling's first home in Baraboo was not the large frame house on 8th Street (now painted yellow), but a modest by comparison white house on the corner of East Street and 6th Street. That house is where Robert Ringling was born in 1897. Later, Ed Rooney's parents bought the house, and when they died its ownership went to Ed's brother who subsequently sold



In 1935, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey featured Jennie Rooney in its aerial ballet. Two years prior Ed Rooney created the first of its kind production, and he continued to produce and choreograph the aerial ballet for a total of seven years.

Circus World Museum

the house to Ed and Jennie Rooney. Many years later, after Charles Ringling died in 1926, his daughter Hester, asked her friend Jennie and her husband to stay in the pink marble mansion²¹ located on Sarasota Bay with “De De” (Edith) Ringling, as her mother was lonely following the death of her husband. The Rooneys had two rooms of their own in the mansion, and they met many of the wealthy people in Sarasota that Mrs. Charles knew, often playing bridge with many of them. Jennie and Ed spent seven years there in the off-season with Mrs. Ringling.²²

Edward Rooney was the originator of the aerial ballet that became a mainstay of Ringling performances for eight decades. In late 1932, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey manager Sam Gumpertz asked Ed to create and produce an aerial ballet. This was the first time that Ringling did this sort of production, and Ed trained 60 girls. According to Jennie, many of them were dancers who came from New York to build their upper body strength and learn the aerial maneuvers that would allow them to perform the swinging ladder and web routines. Starring in that impressive display was Jennie Rooney performing her cloud swing in the center

ring while Ed swung her from the ground below. She hung by her toes, with no gimmick. Ed produced the aerial ballet every year, for seven years, until 1939.²³

The Rooneys were on the Ringling show in 1938 when it closed mid-season due to the strike in Scranton, Pennsylvania. They went down to Florida for the winter, and then returned to Ringling for the next spring.²⁴

Ed and Jennie Rooney appeared on Ringling Bros. from 1912 through 1918 and then on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey from 1919 through 1940 (excluding 1929-1931). In their years away from Ringling they worked in theatres in Europe including the Palladium in London and in vaudeville theatres in the United States, including Grauman’s Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, California. During some winters such as in January 1925, they played in vaudeville and later appeared at spring fairs in the South. During the off-seasons in 1938 and 1939, the Rooneys performed in the Medina Shrine Circus in Chicago. After 1942, they worked indoors with Hamid-Morton and a variety of Shrine shows, and during the summers, they appeared on outdoor dates in parks and at fairs.²⁵

Later in life, Jennie said that while she was performing, she did not look down because she was afraid of heights. In fact, she even got dizzy looking out the window of a tall building. She had stayed in the entertainment world because it was all her husband knew, and he grew up with the Rooney



This 1938 photo shows Jennie Rooney at age 44. She had been with the Ringlings for more than half her life.

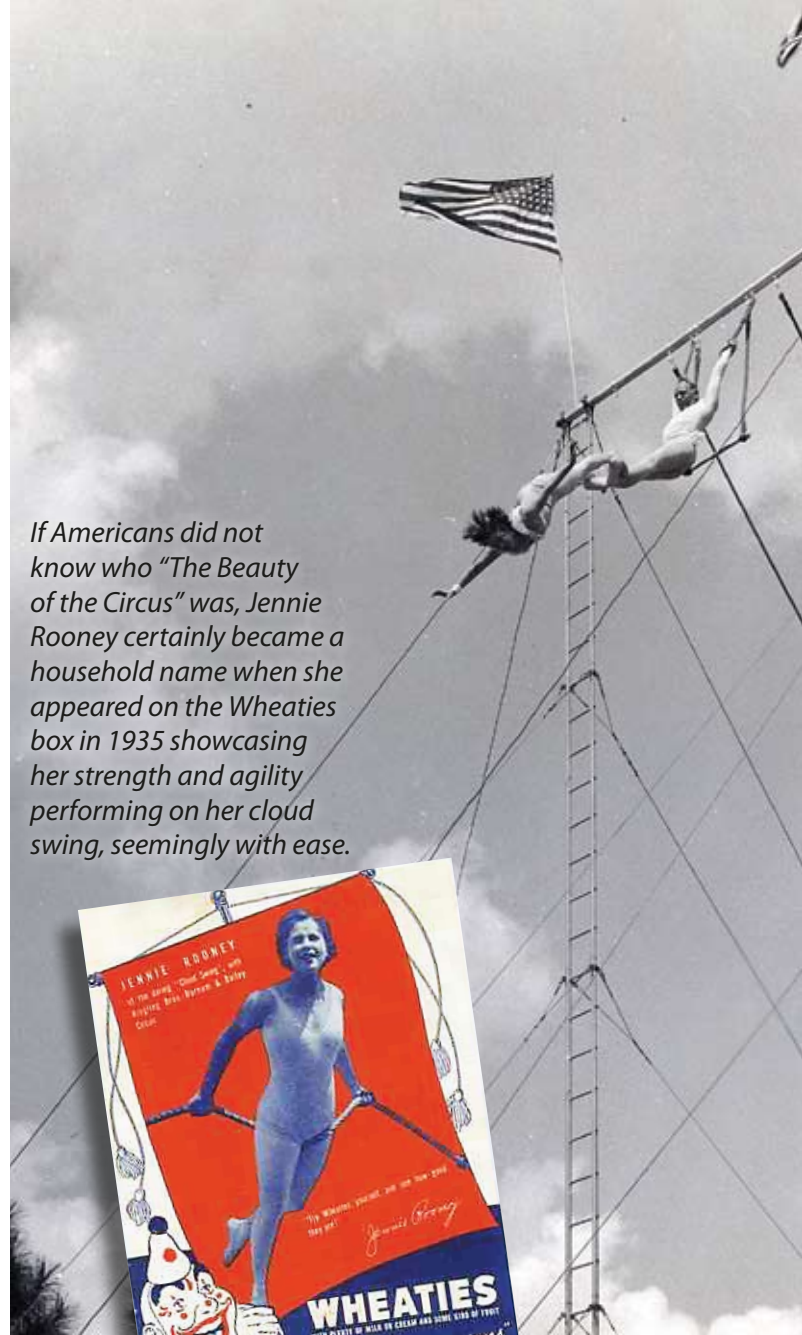
Circus World Museum

circus family all around him. On the other hand, Jennie was literally given away to the circus, and with no education, she did not really have a choice but to grow up and stay in the circus. She had quite a few close calls with accidents while performing, but never was seriously hurt. She attributed this to her husband always being on top of their rigging maintenance and consistently replacing the wires on her rigging.²⁶

Their son, Johnny, named after his uncle, famed equestrian, John B. Rooney, was born in 1915. He grew up living with Ed's parents in Baraboo, as many of his other cousins did as well. He studied dentistry at Marquette University and became an oral surgeon. Later he served in the Air Force in the South Pacific during World War II, and retired as a colonel.²⁷ Jennie said that while he was growing up her son did not like spending his vacations on the circus. He hated the dust, rain and the hard life of living on the circus. Jennie said if she had a choice, she would not live the hard circus life over again. This was in stark contrast to her husband who said, without a doubt yes, if he had been given the choice he would live the circus life over again.²⁸

The orphan who rose to circus royalty, Jennie Rooney died in Titusville, Florida in May of 1983 at the age of 89. The aerialist who had been known as "The Beauty of the Circus" was buried in Manasota Memorial Park in Bradenton.

While in her seventies, living in Sarasota, Jennie said she did not go to the circus anymore. When asked why, she just said, "I'm just not interested. Those days are past and gone now..."²⁹ **BW**



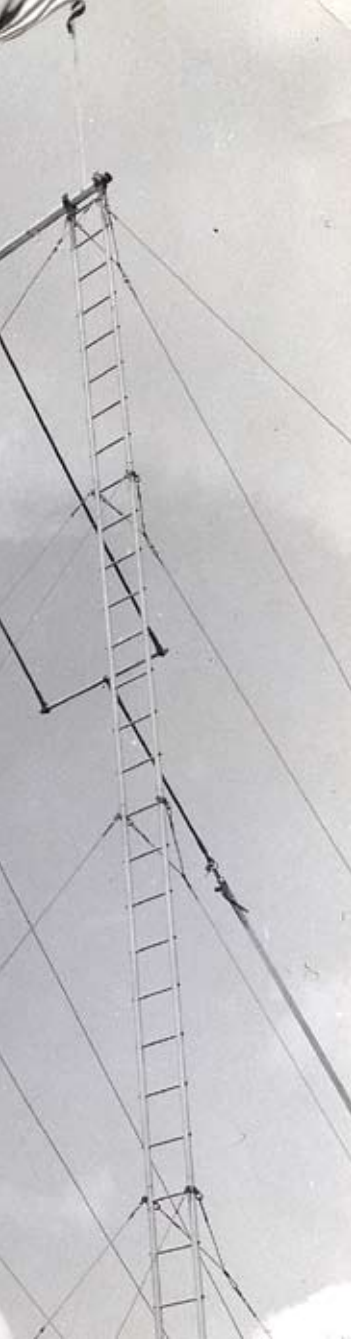
If Americans did not know who "The Beauty of the Circus" was, Jennie Rooney certainly became a household name when she appeared on the Wheaties box in 1935 showcasing her strength and agility performing on her cloud swing, seemingly with ease.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful for the assistance of the following individuals who helped obtain information and images for this article: Fred Pfening III, Pete Shrake, Maureen Brunsdale, Mark Schmitt, Jennifer Lemmer Posey, Chris Berry and especially my dad, Greg Parkinson who provided valuable guidance.

Endnotes

1. John D. Draper, "Those Other Cousins from Baraboo - The Rooney Families," *Bandwagon*, July-August 1992, p. 10.
2. Jennie always referred to Hines as "Johnny."
3. Interview of Jennie and Ed Rooney conducted by Richard Flint on March 9, 1971 in Sarasota, Florida, tapes and transcript at the Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center, Circus World Museum.
4. Ibid.



About the Author

Julie Parkinson has held lead positions for Cirque du Soleil productions in Las Vegas including The Beatles LOVE, VIVA Elvis, and Zarkana. She also did freelance work for Cirque as a scenic and fine art painter for touring shows such as Toruk and OVO. Earlier in her career, she served as Company Manager of the Big Apple Circus and toured with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's Blue Unit as a member of its performing cast. Julie first performed at Circus World Museum where at age 10 she appeared in its circus and magic shows. She also participated in featured roles in a dozen editions of the Great Circus Parade in Milwaukee. During her 15-year career in the circus ring, Julie performed in aerial productions as well as her own solo act, appeared in elephant and bareback riding acts, and assisted with the presentations of camels and a giraffe.



The Rooney double trapeze act, date unknown.

Milner Library,
Special Collections,
University of Illinois,
Bloomington

This photograph, taken in St. Louis, shows Jennie Rooney as Cinderella and equestrian Joe Hodgini who portrayed Prince Charming in the Ringling Bros. 1916-1917 fairy tale spectacle.

The Ringling Museum,
Tibbals Collection



5. Ibid.
6. Sarah Comstock, *Hartford Courant*, June 3, 1923, p. 10 (title unknown).
7. George E. Emery, "Ed Rooney and Wife Head List of American Aerialists Although They Are Grandparents", *The Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, July 30, 1944.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Interview of Jennie and Ed Rooney conducted by Richard Flint, op. cit.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Draper, op. cit., p. 10.
14. Interview of Jennie and Ed Rooney conducted by Richard Flint, op. cit.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Janet M. Davis, editor, *Circus Queen & Tinker Bell: The Memoir of Tiny Kline* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 159.
18. *Billboard*, April 10, 1926, p. 12.

19. Ringling Brothers World's Greatest Shows artist contracts with "Ed Rooney & Wife," 1912 and 1913, Pfening Archives.
20. Interview of Jennie and Ed Rooney conducted by Richard Flint, op. cit.
21. The Charles Ringling mansion was built next to John Ringling's "Cad'Zan" mansion. It was completed in 1926 just before Charles died in December. Edith Ringling lived in the mansion until her death in 1953.
22. Interview of Jennie and Ed Rooney conducted by Richard Flint, op. cit.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Draper, op. cit., p. 10.
26. Interview of Jennie and Ed Rooney conducted by Richard Flint, op. cit.
27. John D. Draper, "Rooney Family History," undated documentation, Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center, Circus World Museum.
28. Interview of Jennie and Ed Rooney conducted by Richard Flint, op. cit.
29. Ibid.

THE EVER-CHANGING NEVER-CHANGING CIRCUS

by Earl Chapin May • Reprinted from *The Shrine Magazine* July 1927

Editor's note: Earl Chapin May's landmark book, *The Circus from Rome to Ringling*, was published in 1932. For many, May's review of circus history has been deemed a classic. Others point out its scholarly weaknesses and somewhat narrow view of the subject. Either way, from *Rome to Ringling* was highly regarded for more than a generation. In his book, May devoted a chapter to "The Ever Changing Never Changing Circus." Many of us found that thought to be enlightening, and I for one have quoted the statement often. What I did not know was that May had set forth this assertion several years prior. The following article is characteristically chocked full of anecdotes and somewhat off-subject information. Nevertheless, it may have been the first time that Earl Chapin May published his thesis that certain elements of the circus were transforming while others endured seemingly forever.

If your heart is as young as it should be, you still thrill at the sight of gaudy circus bills, you still leap lightly out of bed at the unmistakable rumble of red wagons along your city streets; you are still enthralled by the gleam of spangles, the blare of bands and the flapping of great white tents on your local circus grounds. I believe your heart is still as young as that for more than twelve million Americans who paid to see our circuses in 1926 and this was a new record, in circusdom.

These pulsating peripatetic tented shows retain their popularity because a new crop of kids is raised each year; kids love circuses as they love their mother's milk, and, while they soon outgrow their need for nature's nourishment they do not lose their zest for the clown, the elephant and the tan-bark ring. Our hunger for this form of entertainment is just as lusty as when the Caesars fed their subjects on bread and circuses. Hence, beautiful ladies in tights and Tarleton skirts will pirouette on fat rosinbacks, fearless aerialists will fly from lofty perch to high trapeze and limber acrobats will bend

and spring and somersault until humanity no longer populates this globe. This is the origin and destiny of circuses because the human race and circuses are ever changing but never change.

To the modern laity a circus is a vast, colorful enterprise which rolls on a long and garish special train into town, pitches its magic city of sidewalls and "tops", gives the town a holiday then folds its tents and rolls off again to pitch again a hundred miles away. The typical modern tented show does travel during the warmer months on a special and very heavy train that sometimes covers twelve thousand miles during its season on the road. But both equipment and accomplishment are merely in keeping with the times. It was not always thus as I well know.

In the attic of my old home in Illinois repose a pair of pink and spangled knickerbockers and high chamois boots. Above the bag in which these are concealed hangs a brightly

ferruled whip whose long lash ends in a silken cracker thinned by antebellum use. My father owned these priceless accoutrements of circusdom when, as ringmaster of the Older & Orton Circus¹ – vanished these many years from the trouper world – he toured by wagon from Minnesota to Texas and Florida and return, over roads we would deem impassable today. His route books, yellowed with age but preserved in my hometown bank, record a thousand deeds of heroism such as, "Traveled from Salem to Montgomery, forty miles."

That was some day's journey when horsepower drew the old "mud shows" from town to town, from "stand" to "stand." Father gloried in his job as ringmaster for 'twas he who with grandiloquent words and wave of hand announced the entrance of the bareback queen.

But when my father thanked the towners for their kind attention and announced with dignity that the performance in the single ring was all out and over, he prepared for his



Earl Chapin May as he appeared at about the time he wrote this article, c. 1927.

Circus World Museum

S. May First 1856
Commenced With
H. Orton's Circus Company
at Delevan Wisconsin Aug 13


| | | | |
|-------|-----------|-------------------|------------|
| Mon | " 15 | Johns Town | " 12 " |
| Tues | " 16 | Langsville | " 10 Miles |
| Wed | " 17 | Beloit | " 12 " |
| Thurs | " 18 | State of Illinois | |
| Thurs | " 18 | Rockford | " 18 " |
| Fri | " 19 " | Byron | " 14 " |
| Sat | " 20 " | Adeline | " 18 " |
| Mon | " 22 " | Millageville | " 28 " |
| Tues | " 23 " | Comor | " 14 " |
| Wed | " 24 " | Prophet's Town | " 12 " |
| Thurs | " 25 " | Genesees | " 20 " |
| Fri | " 26 " | Cambridge | " 12 " |
| Sat | " 27 " | Galva | " 14 " |
| Mon | " 29 " | Knoxville | " 28 " |
| Tues | " 30 " | Avon | " 22 " |
| Wed | October 1 | Bernadotte | " 25 " |
| Thurs | " 2 | Asloria | " 17 " |

In 1856, Earl Chapin May's father signed on with Orton's Circus in Delevan, Wisconsin. This page from his father's hand-written route book, records that the one-ring horse-drawn wagon show usually traveled less than 20 miles per day.

Circus World Museum

most important daily job by sleeping four hours in a dubious crossroads hostelry. At the end of this repose, he gulped a breakfast as day dawned and, in his buggy, piloted the weary caravan along rural lanes and through the wilderness to where other towners waited for the coming of the show. The master of arenic ceremonies was likewise the master of transportation for the Older & Orton show.

In this latter guise he found fords across swollen streams and when he reached a place where two trails forked he laid a fence rail across the trail which should be avoided by his followers. When the sleepy, travel-stained cavalcade caught up with him outside the "stand" he saw that faded plumes bedecked each driver's and musician's head before the grand free street parade set all the villagers agape.



GO AND SEE
ORTON & OLDER'S
GREAT
SOUTHERN CIRCUS
AND
PERFORMING ANIMALS,
 WITH A FULL AND EFFICIENT CORPS OF
 Riders, Gymnasts, Acrobats and Vaulters
 WILL EXHIBIT AT CHARLOTTE.
Monday & Tuesday, March 21 & 22d.
 ONE OF THE LEADING FEATURES OF
 this Model Company is the introduction of the
LION AND LEOPARD, by Prof. TUBBS in the
 open ring—a feat never performed by any other
 Company.
 Doors open at half past 1 and half past 6 o'clock
 —to commence at 2 and 7 o'clock.
 Admission 50 cents.
 At the close of the Circus, and under the same
 Pavilion.
LEWIS & CO.'S
SABLE HARMONISTS
 Will give one of their pleasing **ETHIOPIAN EN-**
TERTAINMENTS. Admission 25 cents.
L. C. BLAKE, Agent.
 March 15, 1859. 2w

Orton & Older's newspaper ad for the 1859 date in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Circus World Museum

Although occasionally delayed by fires, floods and riots, my father kept that Older & Orton circus on the road five years until the Civil War caused him to quit the business and settle down, and, much later, bring me into the world, blessed with his love for circuses. I mention his great troup-ing deeds because they were typical of our circus pioneers. I doubt if there were more than forty souls or sixty horses with Older & Orton in the palmiest days, but now —

During the tenting season of 1926, the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows traveled on one hundred cars each sixty feet or more in length. With this mammoth, modern aggregation of all the wonders in the



This 1926 poster was used to advertise the gigantic show May described in his article.

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world were more than fifteen hundred people, six hundred horses and forty elephants! The Ringlings' spread of canvas required twelve acres of pitching space. Fifteen thousand towners could and did crowd into its big top to applaud three hundred artists performing in three rings, on three stages, along a quarter mile of hippodrome track and in the air above it all. Three million dollars' worth of circus property was transported nearly fifteen thousand miles in thirty weeks. A dozen other railroad shows of lesser magnitude kept clear of "the Big One" or "the Big Bertha" as they call the Ringling show, and toured from Halifax to San Diego and from Seattle to Tampa between March and December first.

These efficient prosperous institutions of the present day are essentially like that my father piloted before the Civil War. They are much larger than the tiny "mud shows" but they have not changed materially in character. But while the circus never changes fundamentally, it changes annually in certain particulars. Take, for example, the circus attitude toward towners kids.

Although he still discourses upon the subject eloquently, it was thirty years ago that Cousin Bill, now a mighty mer-

chandiser but then a vernal barefooted boy, made a verbal contract with a circus canvasman. According to this contract, Bill was to see the show if he hustled seats and stakes and toted water for the elephant. But after Bill had hustled sweatily and toted water from a neighbor's well until his arms were of the length and suppleness of garden hose, the elephant's thirst was still unquenched and Bill had missed two nice home meals. Still he was all pep and eagerness when he asked the canvasman for admission to the show.

The canvasman's reply was laconically to the point. Bill recalls it vividly. The words were "Get out of here, you punk." And Bill got, thus avoiding contact with the roughneck's boot. Towner kids then had no rights the circus people were bound to respect. They're ace high with the circus people now. John Francis O'Connell, better known as "Cow," used to keep his rough-necks on the job when he was in charge of canvas on the Sells-Floto show by holding weekly "schools" for his help outdoors or on the blue-seats in the big top between the performances. "Cow" was also skilled in jollying his men and made it his boast that none of them "blew" him during wet weather. But even he lost a lot of help when the show reached southern territory in the fall when cotton

May praised the capacity of circus motor trucks to do the work that previously required "fifty or sixty Percherons." This photo shows a lineup of trucks on a Ringling-Barnum lot in 1923.

Circus World Museum

pickers' wages were unusually high.

For this and sundry other reasons circus "Governors" have learned to cherish townner kids. While visiting Sparks Circus on Staten Island last spring I thought of Cousin Bill's sad fate as I saw George Singleton, Sparks' boss canvasman, distribute special helper's tickets to a long line of small boys who had labored to get the Sparks tents up.

But while the eager small boy gains in prestige around the big top and its accessories, he loses or is seemingly about to lose the priceless boon of seeing the street parade go by, for the latest slogan in circusdom is "No more parades." The millions of motor cars, which have enlarged the drawing radius of the traveling shows until business is bigger than they have previously known, have threatened to stop the street parades.

The mighty Ringlings abandoned theirs in 1918 because traffic conditions in the larger cities delayed it and the afternoon performances.²

Motor trucks are working another change in circusdom. The horse will always be as inseparable from our great tented shows as clowns, peanuts and elephants. But only the smallest of the railroad shows attempts to move their heaviest wagons along our streets or across the circus lots without using motor trucks as auxiliaries. Rarely, indeed, do you see a "pushing" elephant on the job. One truck can haul a dozen wagons formerly hauled by fifty or sixty Percherons, and a motor truck can be used as

Most railroad circuses in the early 1920s placed gas-motored mechanical pile drivers into service. Over time, the innovation began to be referred to as simply a "stake driver."

Circus World Museum



either motive power or brake.

Even the sweating sledge gangs, which with rhythmic "tap, tap, tap" drive the tent stakes, are being supplanted on most shows by a pile-driver, gas-motored device which sends the oak and hickory into the hardest ground so fast that not even a late arrival in a town prevents the show from opening its front doors on time. Charley Andress who invented that device, now farms his thousand acres of rich land near Great Bend, Kan., and ruminates upon the years he trouped with the big ones in Europe and America. And I don't hold the mechanical stake-driver against that prosperous veteran. It has saved many an aching back. But it doesn't seem like a circus without sledges.

There is another improvement at which I'm peeved.





This press photograph shows the legendary equestrienne May Wirth at the pinnacle of her career with Ringing Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, along with her maid and an unidentified clown. A photo of Wirth illustrated E. C. May's article in The Shrine Magazine.

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May wrote that the famous Hodgini's were raising their "little daughter Harriet" and her brother to be riders. Harriet Hodgini, seen in this c. 1922 image, became one of the great bareback riders of the 20th century, starring with Sells-Floto, Cole Bros. and other circuses.

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When I trouped with Reynolds and Gentry and the Ringlings in their early days, all showmen depended on gasoline to light their lots and tops at night, with coal oil torches for the loading runs. Now vastly more efficient electric light plants turn night into day when the sun goes down, hence the crowded big top and menagerie are more like vast theaters than a pair of circus tents. I suppose the towners as well as the modern troupers really like these new-fangled illuminating systems. But the fierce light they throw upon the blue-seats and reserves are hard on the short changers among the candy butchers – or would be if the candy butchers had not generally reformed.

Standards have surely changed in circusing, although not all of them are what are known as "Sunday school shows." If you watch the gentleman who sells fancy whistles you may note that when the night performance has reached its final stage and the towners are pouring off the seats toward the exit, the whistle man switches the price sign on his hat from ten to fifteen cents. A bit of thrifty circusing is that.

Class distinctions are passing on the circus lots. Riders are still the peers of all performers in the ring. Aerialists rank next to them in the social circles of the dressing-room. Acrobats are on the next rung of the ladder, as they have always been. And clowns dress in Clown Alley, as has been

their wont since circuses began. The different groups each dine at different tables in the cookhouse and each group does its way most of the time. But within the year I've seen a rider dancing with a canvasman, and recently a bandmaster married an acrobat. There is nothing necessarily regrettable in this breaking down of old social lines. A circus company is, after all, one great big family. So why should its different branches not mingle and intermarry happily?

The one great change upon which troupers comment mournfully is the increasing scarcity of principal riders. Mr. and Mrs. Homer Hobson and their two sons we still have with us. Homer, Sr. has been riding for nearly fifty years. Homer, Jr., and the younger, Herbert, are first class riders. But they don't seem to be as keen about it as their parents are. Mr. and Mrs. Albert Hodgini, scions of two circus families which have been famous for generations in nearly every country on the globe are raising their little daughter Harriet and son Bertie to be riders. The Australian Wirths and English Hannefords brilliantly preserve the traditions of their clan. There are five or six more good "riding acts" whose members do jump-ups, somersaults and pirouettes in the classic style. But with one exception there isn't a single riding barn where youngsters may be trained for the greatest of featured circus acts. And within ten or fifteen years first class



It was Charles Sparks who famously noted the importance of routing a circus to territory where profits could be made.

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circus riders will be missing unless we import them from the other side.

In the field of circus management showmen continue worthy of their steel. Although their overhead is growing steadily, they fight the good fight with the elements and each other as they did when Barnum was in his prime. Before the great world war, the railroads would move a train of ten circus cars fifty miles for \$150. That rate is more than doubled now. I've known big shows to spend \$2,000 just to jump from a Monday to a Tuesday "stand." Routing a show into the money is the biggest task a circus man has to face. As Charley Sparks says, "Any boob can run a circus, the trick is to know where to put it." So circuses moving on the rails now spend huge sums for transportation.

Circus men spend their lives and sometimes hard-earned fortunes in guessing at trade and crop conditions or fighting wind, weather and rival shows. The show "first in" to any normally good circus town gets "first money" which is usually the best. If that rule always held good, many a showman would have his fortune firmly laid away in some sound bank. But last season three shows tried their luck in Florida. The Sparks circus was "in between." It followed one show through that state and was followed by another one. Yet Sparks got the most money of the three, possibly because his name or "title" was best known in that particular territory. Circus owners sit up many a night and general agents,

who are equally responsible for routing the show, die young trying to solve this annual puzzle of finding where the money is.

If the owner of a big shoe factory were to try to erect his plant each morning, manufacture and sell his products for cash to the local market that day, tear down his factory that night and move it a hundred miles – and repeat that process on each of a hundred and fifty consecutive days, he would get a fair idea of what the circus owner wrestles with.

He must be adventurous who would be a circus man. Temperamentally, most circus owners are landlocked buccaneers. Sometimes they hunt trouble greedily. The owner of Howes' Great London show once jumped his stock in trade from Lancaster, Mo. to Phoenix, Ariz. to fight the Al G. Barnes show in its own Pacific Coast territory. The aggressor lost \$150,000 in that campaign. But, to illustrate how the cards turn up in the circus game, the winner, after a few months of security, had to jump his show from southern California to Galesburg, Ill., to escape the foot and mouth quarantine. And yet, save for the railroad show's increased mobility, its problem is much the same as that of my father when he piloted a small "mud show." In each case, the showman has to find where the circus money is awaiting him or he "goes bust."

But with all these additions of motor trucks, electric lights, mechanical stake drivers, water wagons and other equipment which increase efficiency, the circus remains essentially unchanged, that is, unchanged in spirit and appeal.

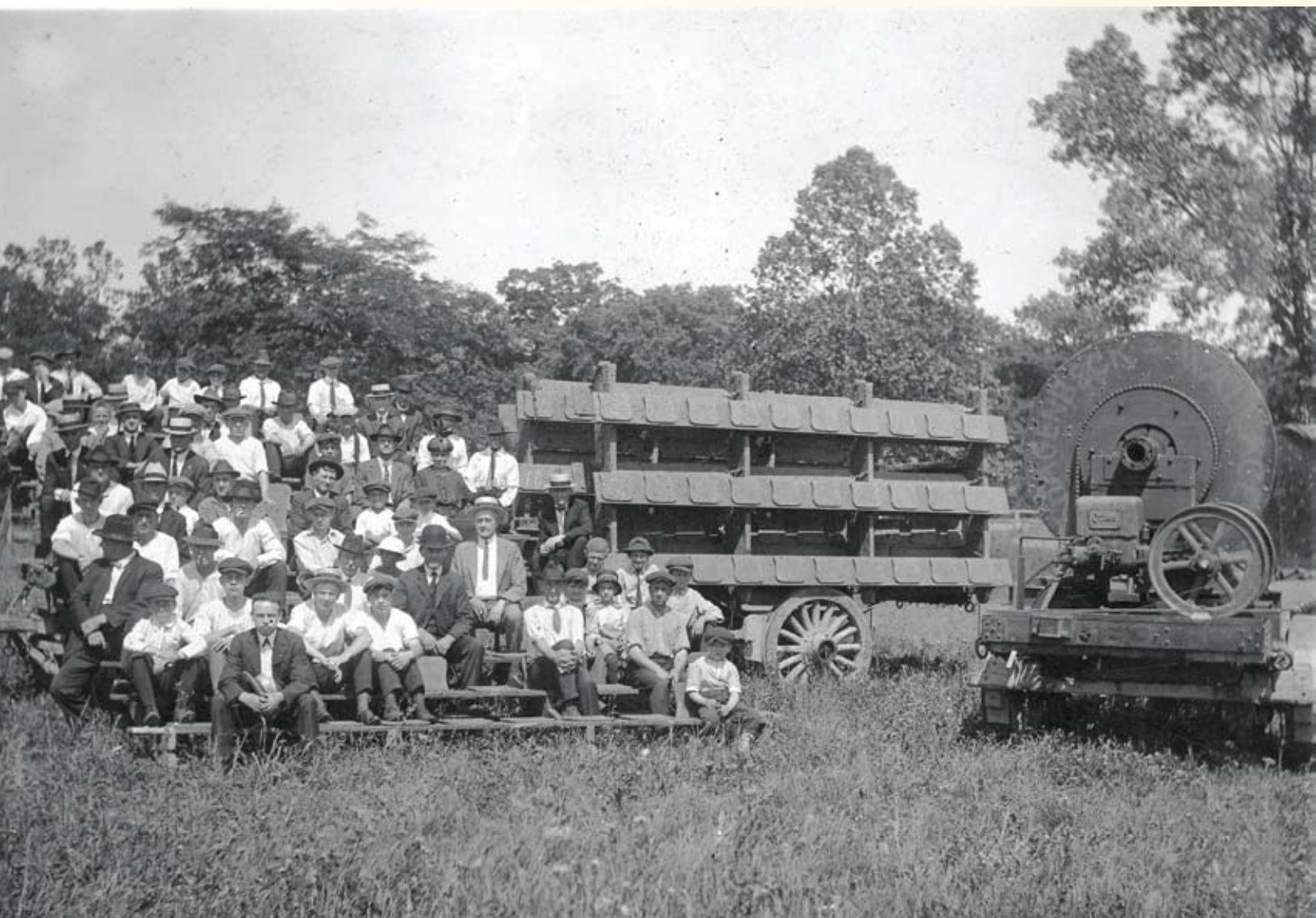
The fire eater, snake charmer, glass blower, Circassian beauty, human skeleton and fat girl flourish annually in the sideshow.

In the menagerie the elephants, camels, monkeys, lions, tigers 'n everything are on exhibition as in the good old days. Giraffes, which modern showmen make much ado about, were traveling with our tented shows in the early seventies. As for the hippos, among our oldest circus bills is one picturing "the blood sweating behemoth of the holy writ." A sacred white elephant bobs up spasmodically but if he is the genuine article, he doesn't cause the ticket wagon to be mobbed. He is only pink or mottled around the ears and eyes. Barnum's white elephant, which amazed our forebears years ago, was a knockout, financially, because the first of our great showmen had the gray beast neatly whitewashed. Barnum possessed originality.

In the department of blare and harmony, you will detect some jazz and popular musical comedy numbers. But last season on the Ringling show I heard Merle Evans' band play the same waltz for the flying-return that I played on the Reynolds show in 1893, and nearly all the quadrilles and gallops for the riding acts go much farther back than that.

But it is in the big top performance that an old fan realizes how little the ever-changing circus really changes.

There was a period during the heated opposition between



The Curtis seat wagon was an innovation that Hagenbeck-Wallace and others used to reduce labor costs and quicken the pace of the set up in the early 1920s.

Circus World Museum

the Barnum & Bailey and the Ringling Brothers' aggregations when the boys from Baraboo and the older showmen whom they were overtaking did produce some novelties. Elaborate and expensive spectacles, including ballets and super-grand opera without much song, opened each performance of the rivals. Each of them carried thrillers, too.

But recently the programs have shown a tendency to depend on standard stuff. The spectacle and ballet have been replaced by the ancient grand entrée. This is called "the spec" by troupers but it is nothing more than the opening number our grandfathers were familiar with. Even before this grand entrée came into vogue, when one ring was all the biggest shows possessed, the program began with a "garland entry" by equestrians and equestriennes. If you attended the Ringling circus this year or last year you saw this garland entry magnified a hundred times. It is "one of the best of latter day innovations," so the critics of our circuses declared.

The principal riding acts follow lines laid down by great

artists who have been in their graves for a half century.

Some say this riding is not so good as formerly, but certainly it is of the accepted school. The routine of the ground and lofty tumblers was fixed by generations of acrobats long gone to the performers' paradise. Trained animals leap through fire hoops, growl and spit and sometimes bite their trainers as was their wont when the first "Wallace, the untamable lion" made his debut. The aerialists who fly above the tightly stretched net just before the program ends perform in the manner of thirty years ago. And so it goes, down to the Roman standing races which came in with the first big top and hippodrome track.

I grant you that mighty leapers no longer bound along the runway and leave the springboard to somersault over camels and elephants, to land feet first if they are lucky on a mattress stuffed with straw. Too many of the performers who "went into the leaps" as per their contracts lost their gymnastic usefulness or mayhap their lives in attempting



John Robinson Circus featured a male and female giraffe in 1927.

Circus World Museum

the difficult and dangerous “triple.” So many broken necks were the harvest of this feature that it was abandoned many years ago.

I admit that Al Miaco and his kindred Shakespearian clowns who answered questions from the seats by quotations from the poet have passed from circusdom. George Conkling and other singing clowns went to their reward or into pantomime when the three ring show got too big for them. Of all the talking clowns who cracked the merry quip with ringmasters and were cracked by them in turn, only Jules Turnour still wears clown white. Jules has been with the Ringlings since they had a little wagon show.

Although fifty clowns now disport where one held sway, and although they do invent some timely gags, clown-stops and walk-arounds, it is the historic business with the air-

stuffed bladder and the detonating slap-stick at which the towners laugh consistently. Gillies still rejoice when someone soaks a clown.

The featured lady gymnast who, with spotlight, special announcement and special music, does a hundred one-armed giant swings while hanging to a loop rope far above the center ring is doing what her mother did and doing it with supreme artistry. The old act is given new dressing, that is all.

This as I see it, is right and proper. If circuses were anything but circuses we'd have naught to do with them. Who would listen to gray-haired, debonair Lew Graham if his “Ladie-e-s and gentlemen” did not boom from the center stage in his old accepted style? Who would have this greatest of all circus orators vary a jot or tittle from the mes-



Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey began its 1926 performances with a "garland entry" extravaganza featuring scores of equestrians. Circus World Museum

sage he has given as official big top announcer during the past quarter century? And would you be as eager to spend a quarter to see the wonders in Sparks' sideshow if George Conners made a different "spiel" from that he used to entice the towners when he made the sideshow openings for Burr Robbins forty years ago? I don't think you would. George got his training when the price of admission to the sideshow hall of fame was "ten cents, one dime, the tenth part of a dollar." He keeps on trouping instead of staying on his fat farm near Circleville, Ohio because farming gives him stomach trouble. I know this because he told me so. Cookhouse chuck, open air and much talking in all kinds of weather keep the old timer fit. And he'll confess, in the privacy of the space behind the flapping sideshow banners, the only time he lost professional form while on the road was when he tried new stuff on his prospective customers.

The tie that binds the proletariat and the patrician to the tented world is stronger than it used to be. That is because the circus changes but remains the same. No longer is the mailed fist of authority forwarded by special delivery to the jaw of the rough-neck or razorback. No longer does the

seat man, struggling with the same type of planks, stringers and jacks his ancestors carried to and from the tents, feel the sting of brass knuckles on his cheek as his department chief chides him for being a bit too slow. The circus business has lost much of its roughness although it has never lost is esprit de corps.

You can trace this increase in trouper gentleness to the disappearance of the grifting crowd. During the seasons when the three card and three shell men vied with the "send joints" and the other "stores" to bilk the gillies who came in all honesty to enjoy the head balancers, contortionists, and performing bears, the circus struggled valiantly to keep its hold on public esteem. The people loved the circus but so often were the towners trimmed by shows that "carried grift" that the time arrived when all men's hands were against the circus men.

P. T. Barnum discovered a cure for that. He was a Sunday school showman from the start. His partner, James A. Bailey, was also "lily white." Even the natural born sucker was sacred to these geniuses. They might fool the people with a faked white elephant, but somewhere beneath the tents,



Madge Fuller (at left), an elephant trainer with Sells-Floto Circus, is seen with her friend E. C. May and his wife, Sella, c. 1926. A photo of Madge Fuller accompanied May's original article in The Shrine Magazine.

Circus World Museum

they gave much more honest entertainment than the town-ers paid for. The Ringling Brothers followed suit. They never had any kind of grafting on their lot.

The influence and example of these master showmen have not only cleaned up nearly all the other shows, they have also made the circus welcome where in other years it had been barred out. The business has become legitimate. Responsible, good citizens manage it. Towns and cities now seek instead of side-track circuses. This change of sentiment has found concrete expression in the organization two years ago of the Circus Fans Association, Incorporated, whose avowed purpose is to assist the honest showman.

One day last summer, I sat in the "reserves" of the smallest circus I had patronized in years. It was a tawdry little show. Its wardrobe and its acts were strictly, reminiscently orthodox. Contortionists, performers on the Roman rings, trapezists, trained dogs, monkeys, ponies, horses and elephants came on, did their stunts and went out again. The performance didn't have a bit of class. It was such as I had seen when I was a small town boy. But on the seats in front of me was a pretty miss with golden hair, a girl of six or

thereabouts. She was playing an important part, for she was bliss personified.

"What would you give to feel like that?" my companion asked me with moist eyes.

"You felt like that when you were six, and so did I," I reminded him.

His face grew thoughtful as the merry clowns came out to do their thrice familiar stuff. "You're right," he answered. "That's what brought me here today."

And that is one of the many million reasons why the ever-changing circus will never change. **Bw**

Some punctuation and spelling in this article have been modified from the original published version, and the following endnotes are the editor's.

Endnotes

1. This show's title was generally seen as Orton's Circus 1854-1857, Orton & Older's Circus 1858-1861, and Orton Bros. Circus immediately after the American Civil War.
2. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey continued to present horse-drawn street parades in 1919 and occasionally thereafter.

BEV KELLEY'S IMPRESSIONISTIC DEPICTION OF THE CIRCUS

Excerpts from *The National Geographic Magazine*, October 1931

"The Land of Sawdust and Spangles – a World in Miniature" by Francis Beverly Kelley

Bev Kelley (1905-1984) first joined Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's press department in April 1930. After only one season, he persuaded National Geographic to publish an article about the circus. Kelley toured with Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus in 1933, and rejoined Ringling-Barnum when John Ringling North took charge in 1938. After leaving The Greatest Show on Earth in 1947, Kelley did publicity work for Dailey Bros. Circus and Cole Bros. He wrote and published a second feature for National Geographic in 1948. One more time he signed on with Ringling-Barnum in 1954. In between circus stints, Kelley fronted numerous Broadway plays and theatrical touring units, and he managed the St. Louis Municipal Opera for six years beginning in 1959.



Master press agent Bev Kelley
c. 1940.

Circus World Museum

It was my good fortune to meet Bev Kelley during the years of the Old Milwaukee Days circus parade, and I got to know him quite well during his annual visits to Baraboo into the early 1980s. He was ever the gentleman – truly one of the kindest and most pleasant individuals you could ever befriend. He was a one-of-a-kind storyteller who always struck a positive cord. He had an exceptional knack for coining words and phraseology, as he aptly demonstrated with his professional writing. The vivid imagery of the circus he created for National Geographic continues to resonate today. These four pages quote a small portion of Bev Kelley's timeless visualization of the circus of yesterday – descriptive prose originally published 87 years ago.

- GTP



Those of us who still cling to the belief that Noah's Ark best illustrates man's ingenious combination of geography and space economy overlook the fact that right under our noses for the last five decades has moved a complete world in miniature, exhibiting its geographical wonders within the confines of a vacant lot, loading itself upon its own railroad caravan, and building a new home in a new town every day.

The magic rumble of red wagons and the footsteps of circusdom's spangled battalions have echoed down the corridors of many summers; yet few really know the phantom white city, a nomadic world of sawdust and spangles, a geographical marvel and a mystery from beginning to end. In this age of ultrarealism the circus is a last frontier.

Stories circulated about the tenacious memory of elephants have been grossly exaggerated, but it is safe to say they never forget how and from whom to beg titbits. The great animals require specially constructed cars for their transportation. In early days they frequently caused derailments of circus trains.

Harry Atwell photograph, Circus World Museum

There is more actual geography within the narrow borders of Spangleland than in any similar space on the face of the earth. From the shores of the seven seas come its citizens, their faces turned toward the open road where lies the winding trail of the big tops.

Such is the population of Spangleland, where people from nearly every country under the sun are fed into the hopper of a highly organized machine to emerge firmly woven into the brilliant mosaic of a fast-moving performance, subscribing without reservation to the one supreme law of the trouper – “The show must go on.” **BW**

Editor's note: the elephant photograph, opposite page, actually appeared in Kelley's 1931 article. The other photos are similar to the ones published in 1931. The originals could not be located.

If the vagabond of auditoriums had a voice, it might say, "Warm summer sunshine baths me; cold, driving rains descend to drench me and to triple my great weight. Gray morning sees me unpacked, laced together like a giant's shirt and hoisted on tall spars and guyed to earth. At dusk, I am an anchored dirigible, shadowy, with soft light leaking through. Midnight sees my titan ribs removed and finds me billowing to earth. And there I lie like some great mushroom, waiting to be loaded into circus wagons rumbling on an endless cycle from show ground to trains and back again. I am the Big Top."

Harry Atwell photograph, Circus World Museum





The vast interior of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey big top sparked Bev Kelley's imagination and led him to compose the poetic caption on page 41 that appeared in his National Geographic article. This 1931 photograph was taken in May during the show's first under-canvas date in Brooklyn, New York. The tented season that followed would be the last for which John Ringling was fully in command of the circus he and his older brothers had launched in 1884.

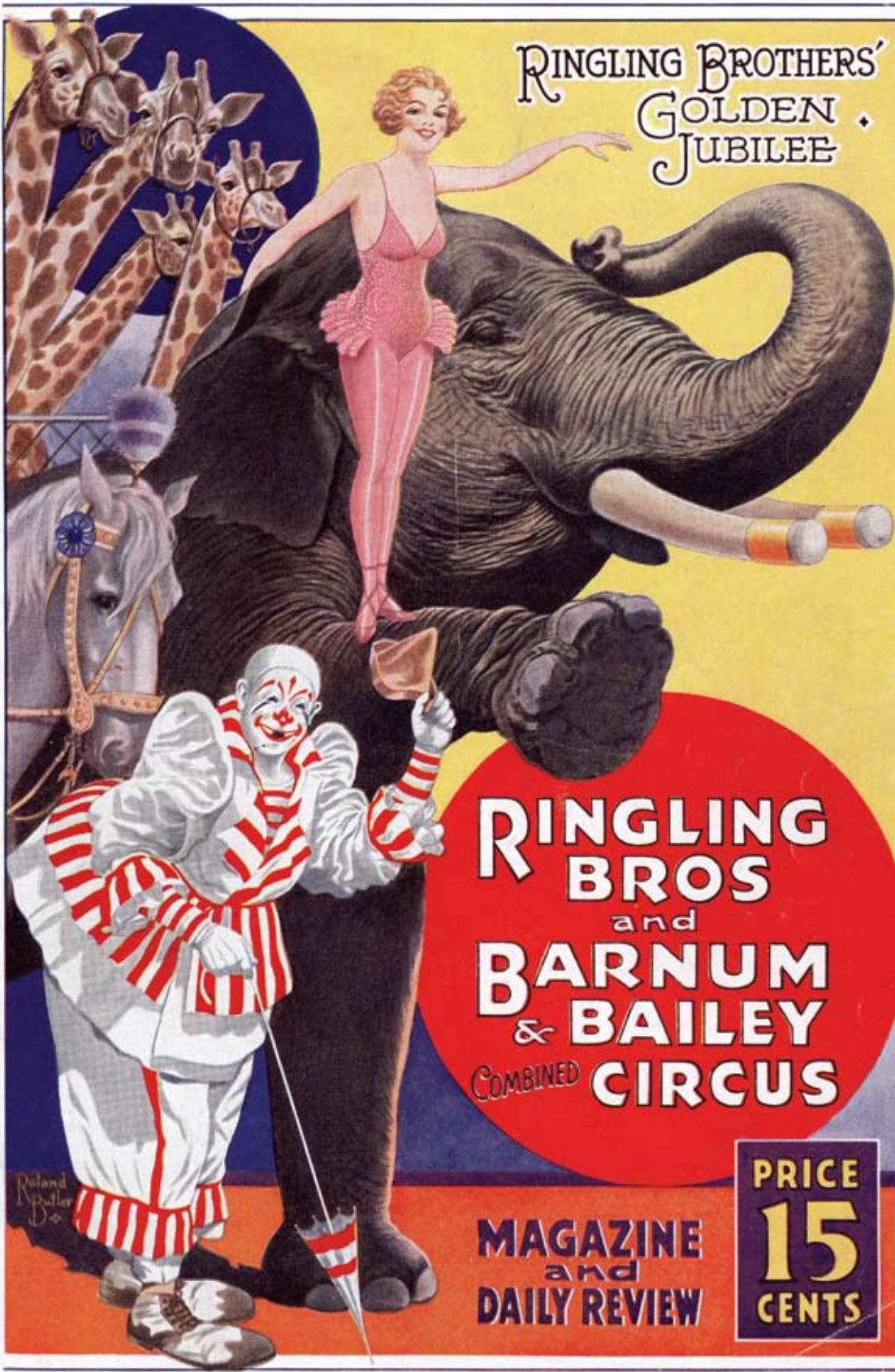


*RINGLING BROS. AND BARNUM & BAILEY CIRCUS
— BROOKLYN N.Y. — 1931 —*

"I am a canvas skyscraper within whose confines troops a world in miniature. I am a temple of eternal joy, where men who cannot read or write rub elbows with kings and behold art. Here, within the borders of a vacant lot, live people from strange lands who speak in foreign tongues, but who know one first loyalty, and that to Spangleland. Beneath me gods of mirth and laughter brew a draught to dispel sorrow. And sometimes death flies side by side with those who thrill the crowd. I am the Big Top."

Edward Kelty photograph, Circus World Museum

RINGLING BROTHERS'
GOLDEN
JUBILEE



RINGLING
BROS
and
BARNUM
& BAILEY
COMBINED CIRCUS

MAGAZINE
and
DAILY REVIEW

PRICE
15
CENTS

1933 Boston Garden



The Return of the Prodigal Sons Baraboo and the Golden Jubilee

by Chris Berry

August 3, 1933 was an ideal summer day in Baraboo, Wisconsin. Flags were flying in a cool breeze, and banners welcomed Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey home for the first time since the two shows had combined in 1919. Rain the night before had cleared the air, and thousands of people had gathered at the railyards to welcome *The Greatest Show on Earth*. The previous day rumors had spread through Baraboo that the first section of the train, the “Flying Squadron,” would be arriving between two and three in the morning, and even at that early hour, there were hundreds waiting.¹

No matter how strong the billing and promotion is, outdoor shows are dependent upon good weather to drive ticket sales. Although blue skies greeted the circus in Baraboo,

that had not been the case the previous day in the western Wisconsin town of La Crosse, where a summer thunderstorm had created problems both on the lot and at the railyards. Despite the relatively short jump of about 100 miles, the driving rain which lasted all day turned the La Crosse showgrounds into a quagmire. Tons of wet canvas had to be packed and wagons that became stuck in the mud had to be extricated by teams of elephants.²

Because of the delays leaving LaCrosse, the first section of the circus train did not arrive in Baraboo until 4:15 a.m., followed by the second at about 5:30 a.m. By the time the third and fourth sections arrived around 6:00 a.m., a crowd estimated at between 1,500 and 2,000 had jammed the Chicago and North Western railyards just across the Baraboo

At the left, the 1933 souvenir program outlined a performance that featured many of the great acts of the era including The Wallendas, The Flying Codonas, Dorothy Herbert, Con Colleano, Felix Adler, Merle Evans and Hugo Zacchini.

Circus World Museum

Above, this colorized photograph taken from the grandstand at the Sauk County Fairgrounds on the morning of August 3, 1933 shows the immensity of the circus during the Golden Jubilee season.

Tegge Circus Archives



For the first time since the death of Otto Ringling in 1911, the portraits of the Ringling brothers, were featured on circus advertising. John Ringling was the only brothers still alive in 1933, and he did not attend the Baraboo homecoming.

Circus World Museum

River from the old Ringling winter quarters. The throng that showed up for the unloading was so enormous that in the predawn hours the entire Baraboo police force was summoned to the scene to direct traffic.³

The relationship between the Ringlings and Baraboo was forged on goodwill and mutual admiration, but after the circus relocated its winter quarters to Bridgeport at the end of the 1918 season there were those in the town who harbored feelings of abandonment and rejection. Some compared the Ringling brothers to the Biblical parable of “The Prodigal Son,” the young man who had asked his father for his inheritance early, only to leave his home and live a life of reckless luxury, abandoning his family, his friends and those who raised him.⁴

Now, 15 years after deserting Baraboo, “The Prodigal Sons” were returning.

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, the circus opened its annual tour in Baraboo, with a string of premiere performances that ended in 1895 when the Ringling Bros. *World’s Greatest Shows* made its first-ever appearance in Chicago, opening indoors at Tattersall’s Amphitheatre in early April. Although the show continued to return to Baraboo each winter, after the final hometown opener in 1894, the circus only returned to give performances twice, August 23, 1895 and July 15, 1897 when the Ringlings’ parents, August and Salome, visited the show and “had dinner in the dining car.”⁵

As the circus grew, its expenses increased. Smaller towns that had once been mainstays on the route were now dropped for longer jumps. The circus was now “playing to

population” in bigger cities such as Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Rockford. Baraboo would never have been considered for a return engagement had it not been for the idea of a 50th anniversary appearance as part of the Golden Jubilee tour of 1933, and even then, it was a long shot.

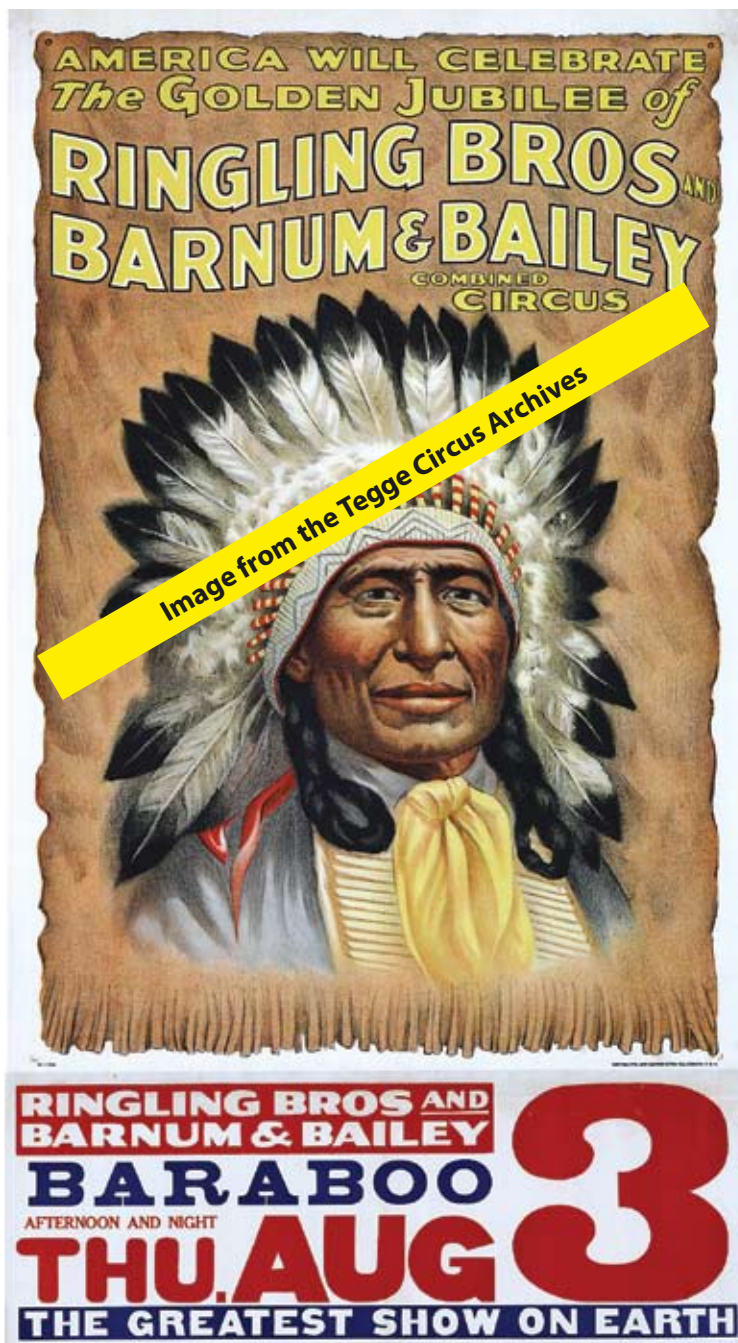
It was in Madison on August 19, 1932 that the idea of bringing the circus back to Baraboo was first proposed. A local fan and attorney named Sverre Braathen was at the show that day, and while having a conversation with Frank Cook, the legal adjuster for the circus, Braathen suggested that the show consider adding Baraboo to the itinerary the following year as part of the Ringling’s 50th anniversary celebration.⁶

Cook assured Braathen that he would mention it to John Ringling, and while we do not know whether he did, the idea of taking the show back to Baraboo probably was not high on the Circus King’s list of priorities in the summer of 1932. Ringling’s enterprises, which now included all the railroad circuses in America, were losing money. The last of the famous brothers was facing devastating financial problems that threatened his control of the circus, plus he had been seriously ill for several months. Rather than traveling with the show, or visiting Europe as was his custom, Ringling spent the summer recuperating at Coney Island’s Half Moon Hotel, owned by showman Samuel Gumpertz, a long-time friend and confidant.⁷

Despite their friendship, or maybe because of it, at a stockholder meeting on November 11, 1932, Gumpertz was tapped by the circus’ Board of Directors to replace John Ringling as boss of the show. The radical move came in hopes of stemming the losses tied to The Great Depression and accelerated by the purchase of the American Circus Corporation six weeks before the Stock Market Crash of 1929.⁸

As the new vice president and general manager of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Gumpertz had a formidable task ahead of him. The Depression had cut Ringling-Barnum profits from roughly \$2,000,000 to under a million dollars in 1932, a trend that was mirrored on the other circuses controlled by the family.⁹ In a front-page story in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Gumpertz tried to downplay the change in leadership, saying that “Mr. Ringling put me in as manager and vice-president. He is not out of the picture, he is still president.” Gumpertz also spoke of an upcoming trip that they would take together to Sarasota to begin making plans for the “Ringling Golden Jubilee,” the following season.¹⁰

With the newspapers reporting the management change along with detailing plans for the 50th anniversary celebration, circus fan Braathen shifted his Baraboo crusade into high gear. Braathen had been meeting with the Baraboo Chamber of Commerce, and he urged them to reach out to Ringling management. An invitation was drafted, and in early December a promising response from Gumpertz arrived:



As part of the promotion of the 50th anniversary, two lithographs with a Native American theme and the slogan "All America Will Celebrate the Golden Jubilee" were produced by Central Printing and Illinois Litho. of Chicago. While "All America" would no doubt be celebrating, the 1933 route only took the show as far west as San Antonio, and the circus trains never crossed the Rockies that season.

Tegge Circus Archives

"You bet the circus is going to play Baraboo, and we've figured on Baraboo being the dearest and nearest to the management of Ringling brothers. Therefore, a letter will be sent you later in the season giving an outline of just what we intend to do in your city. We feel sure we can count on your help to assist in making it a day that will go down in circus history."¹¹

A small item in the *Tampa Times* in late January also provided details on the Golden Jubilee tour, and Gumpertz' claim that it would be "the biggest and best show in history." The article included the first public announcement that the circus would include Baraboo on its itinerary and promised that John Ringling would be the guest of honor there, along with his sister, Ida Ringling North and Mrs. Edith Ringling, the widow of Charles Ringling.¹²

Despite those assurances, Baraboo Mayor Rollo Prothero was not taking any chances. On February 13, 1933 the Mayor, along with Sverre Braathen and a group of local Baraboo civic leaders, met in Madison with the newly inaugurated Governor of Wisconsin, Albert Schmedeman. The Governor agreed to support the idea and asked Braathen to dictate a letter to circus management. About two weeks later Governor Schmedeman received a response from Gumpertz confirming that the show would exhibit in Baraboo that summer.¹³

With circus day still months away, the committee began working to ensure that the Baraboo date would be a success. Even before the meeting with the Wisconsin governor, Braathen approached the management of Madison radio station WIBA with an idea to produce a weekly program that would focus on circus life. The 15-minute episodes began airing on January 27, and over the next several months Braathen personally wrote and appeared on 35 programs which promoted the Golden Jubilee and included circus news as the season unfolded. In addition, he penned a daily column for the *Madison Capital Times*, published on each of the 30 days leading up to the big show's arrival.¹⁴

As the New York debut approached, Gumpertz was confidently predicting a banner year. "We're preparing for our biggest season, and when I say biggest I'm not taking that superlative from one of our circus posters," Gumpertz told the International News Service in an exclusive interview. He spoke of the upcoming tour, including the Madison Square Garden opening and the Chicago engagement that would be held in conjunction with the Century of Progress World's Fair. He also emphasized his plan to bring the show to Baraboo as part of the 50th anniversary celebration.¹⁵

The showman's confidence was apparently bolstered by the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt two weeks earlier. Gumpertz told the reporter, "With Franklin Roosevelt in the White House we're going to bounce back like a rubber ball." He added, "After all the strife and uncertainty this nation has been through, the people want to take their minds off their troubles. They're demanding entertainment and the circus is as fine a medium to give it to them as you can find."¹⁶

Gumpertz' upbeat comments came just days after President Roosevelt declared a "Bank Holiday" where all banking transactions were suspended nationwide. During the period that banks were closed, several states, including Wisconsin, developed plans for printing and distributing emergency scrip which could be used as currency until the crisis subsided.¹⁷



As part of the advance promotion of circus day, the Baraboo Chamber of Commerce distributed scrip currency, and retail customers were encouraged to take their change in the souvenir currency. The Chamber of Commerce reportedly put \$50,000 worth of scrip into circulation with the hope that much of it would be saved by collectors.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

As solvent banks began reopening, the Baraboo Chamber of Commerce seized the moment and developed a promotional gimmick tied to the Golden Jubilee. Commemorative scrip was issued by the Chamber in six denominations from one cent to one dollar. Each of the smaller denominations would carry the image of one of the Ringling brothers, and the \$1.00 note would have the portraits of all five. During the promotion, Baraboo businesses would offer their customers the option of taking their change in the collectible scrip rather than coins. The scrip could then be saved as a souvenir or used as currency at other stores in Baraboo. It was redeemable for legal tender until November 1.¹⁸

The souvenir scrip campaign was embraced by the retail community, and in early July Sverre Braathen wrote to bandleader Merle Evans, touting the success of the program, "The Chamber of Commerce has put in circulation 50-thousand dollars worth of Ringling scrip," Braathen wrote, "most of which undoubtedly will be picked up as souvenirs."¹⁹

Stamp collectors were also supporting the homecoming, and a special pre-printed envelope, or cachet, was created. More than 3,000 envelopes were collected by Baraboo's H. L. Hanson, President of the Sauk County Philatelic Society. The letters were postmarked from Baraboo on the day of the circus, August 3, 1933, and mailed to collectors around the world.²⁰

With the assurance that *The Greatest Show on Earth* would be coming, Sverre Braathen began working to move the Circus Fans Association's annual convention from Chicago to Baraboo. CFA President Harper Joy had previously supported the idea of a convention in Baraboo,²¹ but the Chicago convention had already been scheduled. Braathen championed the idea of relocating the meeting, and by mid-March the convention site was changed to Baraboo.²²

As Baraboo ramped up preparations for the circus



A special postal cachet commemorating the Baraboo homecoming was promoted by the Sauk County Philatelic Society in the weeks leading up to the arrival of the circus. On the day of the Baraboo performances more than 3,000 postcards and envelopes were postmarked August 3, 1933 and mailed to stamp collectors around the world.

Chris Berry Collection

homecoming, the big show was preparing to start the Golden Jubilee season at Madison Square Garden. On April 1, the circus trains left winter quarters following a parade through Sarasota featuring both Samuel Gumpertz and Mrs. Charles Ringling riding in open cars. John Ringling, who was still recovering from a stroke, stood on the platform at the Seaboard Air Line station, with the expectation that he would join the show in a matter of weeks and participate in the Baraboo homecoming.²³

Gumpertz' predictions of a banner season began bearing fruit as soon as the circus arrived in New York. The April 15, 1933 issue of *The Billboard* carried a review of the show and told of an opening day at the Garden that attracted some 19,000 paid admissions. The article also reported the conspicuous absence of John Ringling, who missed most of the season, finally joining the show in Birmingham on October 3 at the tail end of the tour.²⁴

With or without John Ringling at the helm, the circus had a tremendously successful spring opening at the Garden. The receipts from the New York engagement, now in the Pfening Archives, show that during the 31 days that the show was at Madison Square Garden it grossed \$534,404.57.²⁵ When adjusted for inflation, the New York opener generated the equivalent of nearly \$11 million in 2018 dollars.

If Gumpertz had correctly predicted a solid performance at the box office, then he also delivered on his promise of a stellar performance in the circus ring. In its review of the opening matinee, *The New York Times* said, "the performance progressed smoothly for a short three and a half hours," and stated that "Sam Gumpertz, the new manager, had made good his boast of a 'bigger and better than ever' circus."²⁶

The Golden Jubilee performance featured many of the great circus acts of the early 20th century. Equestrian displays



Dorothy Herbert was only 23 years old when this photograph was taken on the Baraboolot, but she was already a headliner. Throughout the Gumpertz era she was a featured performer who thrilled audiences with her equestrian skills.

Circus World Museum

were presented by Ella Bradna, Dorothy Herbert, the Davenportes and the Reiffenach Sisters, as the Wallendas, Grentonas and Con Colleano danced across the wire. Acrobatic troupes in 1933 included the Hugonys, Rubios, Yacopis and the Danwills, and high in the dome of the big top, the Codonas, Concellos and Harolds were joined by aerialist Lusita Leers, along with Ed and Jennie Rooney.

The Ringling-Barnum clown alley of 1933 featured many legendary clowns including Felix Adler, Lou Jacobs, Charlie Bell, Chesty Mortimer, Paul Wenzel and Jack LeClair.

Other headliners on the show that season included Hugo Zacchini who closed the program with his human cannonball act, and during the indoor dates in New York and Boston, wild animal trainer Clyde Beatty performed in the center ring, on loan from the Ringling-owned Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus.

In addition to the main performance, the 1933 sideshow featured many well-known attractions, including the debut of the heavily-promoted Giraffe-Neck Women of Burma, along with 27-inch tall Lya Graf, who just two months before had become world famous when press agent Frank Braden put her on the lap of the publicity-shy Wall Street Banker J.P.

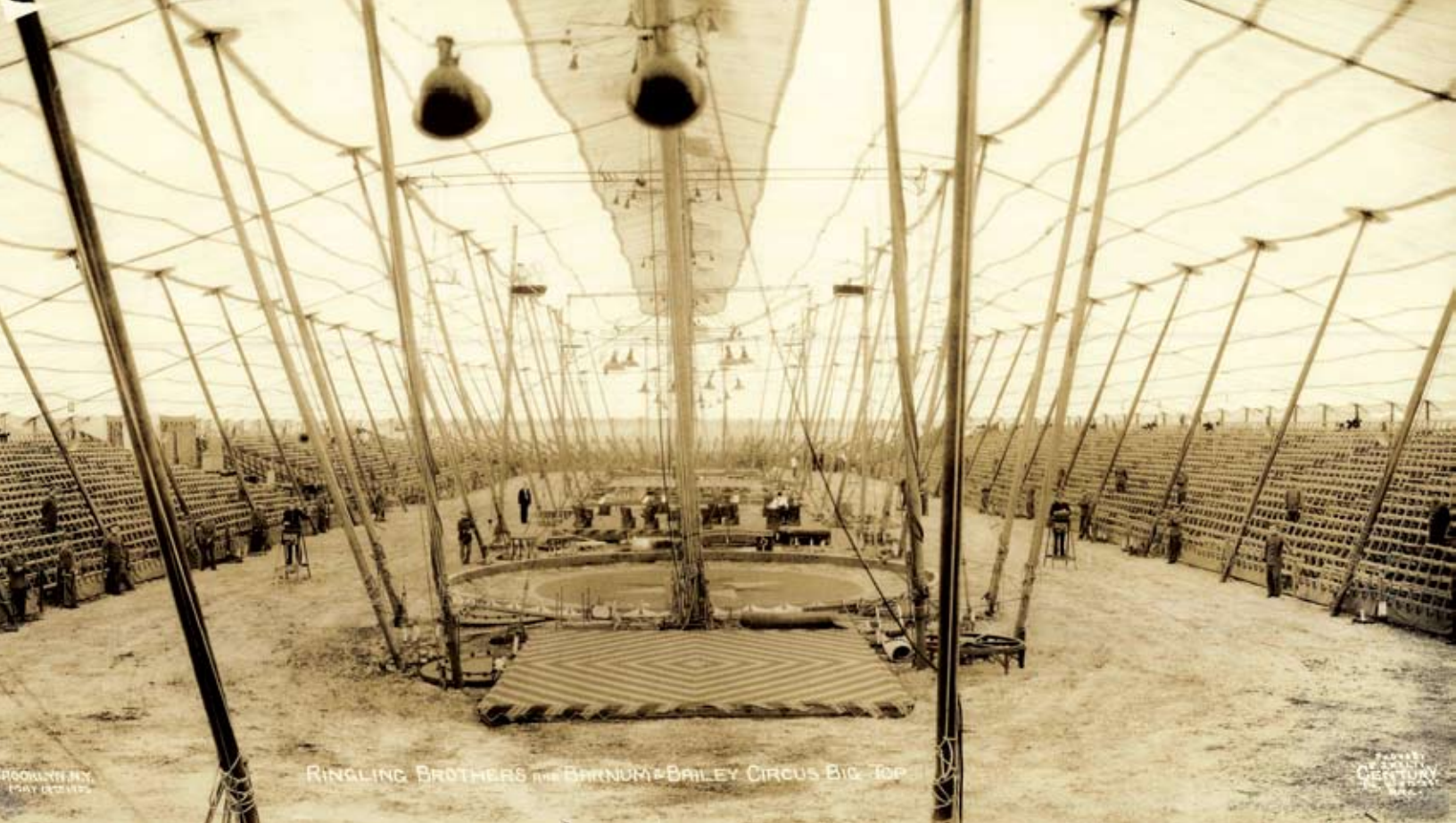
Morgan at a Senate Banking Committee hearing. Others in the Golden Jubilee sideshow included giant Jack Earle, the Doll Family of midgets, Clicko the African Bushman along with Iko and Eko, the stage names for Willie and George Muse, billed by the circus as "Ambassadors from Mars."

Although Samuel Gumpertz was clearly in charge of the operation, he was ably assisted by a team of veteran managers including Carl

The "Giraffe-Neck Women" were a feature in both the sideshow and during the main performance in 1933. The three women that traveled with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, and one who was with Hagenbeck-Wallace, came from the Padaung tribe of Burma. Women of the tribe coiled brass around their necks as a symbol of beauty and tribal identity.

Poster Photo Archives,
Posters Please, Inc.





The 1933 big top featured three rings and four stages seen here during the season's first outdoor stand in Brooklyn. During the matinee performance in Baraboo, 11,385 people packed the tent with hundreds sitting on straw that had been spread on the hippodrome track.

Circus World Museum

Hathaway who supervised day-to-day operations, along with equestrian director Fred Bradna, and Pat Valdo who managed the show's personnel.

From Madison Square Garden the circus moved to the Boston Garden. It then began the long tour under canvas, pitching the show's tents for the first time on May 15 in Brooklyn at the corner of Flatbush and Nostrand Avenues.²⁷

As the tenting season unfolded, another of the big attractions that was getting a lion's share of newspaper ink was the "The Durbar of Delhi," which had also been the title of the Barnum & Bailey spec in 1904.²⁸ The theme was familiar to Gumpertz as he too had staged his own version of "The Durbar of Delhi" nearly 30 years before at Luna Park, the Coney Island amusement park he managed at the time.²⁹

The "Durbar" or "Court of Delhi" was an actual historic event which had been held three times, in 1877, 1903 and in 1911, each to mark the succession of the British monarch to the position of Emperor or Empress of India. The actual Durbars had lasted from two to four weeks and required months of preparation.³⁰ Gumpertz apparently liked the concept so much that he repeated the spec with virtually no change from 1933 until 1936, renaming it "India" in 1937.³¹

Despite the fact the pageant would be recycled throughout the Gumpertz era, in 1933 the staging was new and exactly the type of display that was promised for the Golden

Jubilee. While the show was at the Boston Garden, the *Globe* gushed in its review:

"First and most spectacular of all was the new 'spec' called the 'Durbar of Delhi' and said to be an accurate reproduction of that historic and magnificent Oriental pageant. The show's huge herd of elephants paraded draped with splendid trappings copied from photographs and paintings of those used in the real Durbar.

"In the procession was a golden girl riding on a golden elephant, both made resplendent with gold paint. Some of the elephants bore brilliantly decked howdahs on their backs, containing perhaps the Rajah and the beauties of the Delhi harems. Girls in the gala attire of Indian women carried excited macaws swung in wicker cages. All-in-all a delightful and eye-filling spectacle."³²

Meanwhile in Baraboo, Braathen and the local committee were dealing with a myriad of details and minutiae so that circus day would be smooth and trouble free. In advance of the show's arrival, the local committee was able to arrange for a free lot at the Sauk County Fairgrounds, along with free licenses and the assurances from Baraboo businesses that they would not accept passes for displaying lithographs in store windows.³³

Throughout the spring of 1933, a correspondence developed between Braathen and John M. Kelley, general counsel for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Although the exchanges were cordial, as the show date approached, Kelley's patience with the circus fan began to wear thin, as evidenced by a meeting the two had in Madison, and described by Braathen in his 1973 *White Tops* article "The End of an Era":

"About 10 days before the Baraboo date, John Kelley, the attorney for the circus called at my office, with blood in his eyes. He said, 'You have no damned business to be monkeying with the show. We will get a light afternoon house and not a damn thing in the evening.' When the show was in Madison on Saturday July 29, we were visiting with Mr. Gumpertz under the marquee before the evening performance. He said that he was going to pull the show out of Baraboo and put it in Janesville. He said that the show just had to play to population.

"We argued and argued with Mr. Gumpertz and told him all the publicity we had given to the circus and we were certain the show would have a very big day. He finally agreed to let the show play Baraboo. We were very well satisfied that Kelley had talked to Gumpertz and had told him to pull the show out of Baraboo."³⁴

What Braathen did not reveal in his *White Tops* recollection is what was said at another meeting that he had with Kelley about a month before, and which is recorded in a pair of letters in the Braathen archives at Illinois State University's Milner Library.

In a letter dated June 20, 1933, the circus attorney politely but firmly told Braathen that the decisions about when and where the show will play would be made solely by the circus. He also said the circus itself would not ask for free licenses for fear it could be turned down, and at the end of the letter Kelley wrote:

"You will recall the confidential matter we discussed at your office. This matter will have to be observed to the utmost, or there will be no Baraboo showing at all. It is a vital personal matter which concerns the personnel of the show and admits of no compromise or exception."³⁵

The nature of that confidential matter would have been lost to history had Braathen, a lawyer himself, not kept detailed files of his correspondence. In a letter written the same day, Braathen memorialized the conversation in a note that he sent to Harper Joy, President of the CFA. In his letter Braathen explained the tenuous relationship that existed between members of the Ringling family, especially Lou Ringling, the widow of Al., and the newly empowered Edith Ringling, the widow of Charles, who was closely working with Gumpertz on the circus of 1933.

The Circus Fans Association had planned to present Lou Ringling with an honorary membership in the organization, and when told of this Kelley emphatically rejected the plan, as Braathen explained to the CFA president:

"Kelley gave me much information on the set up of the Ringlings, Gollmars, etc. so I want you to keep everything confidential. I have heard many rumors on this, that and everything. You hear so many things you don't know what to believe and what not to believe.

"There is a real friction between Mrs. Al. Ringling and the other Ringlings. There is also friction between all the Ringlings as

well as the Gollmars. Kelley suggested that I merely write a letter to Mrs. Charles Ringling expressing the gratification of the Wisconsin fans that the show is coming to Baraboo, and that we don't cater to any one of the Ringlings when the show is in Baraboo because of the great friction.

"Because of this I believe that it would be advisable that I merely mail Mrs. Al's membership to her and that we do not play it up in any way in Baraboo. To do so will antagonize Mrs. Charles etc. etc. Everything along these lines has to be handled with kid gloves and Kelley suggested that we just let the show come in and forget the Gollmars and Ringlings."³⁶



As circus fans arrived in Baraboo for their annual convention, the local news was dominated with feature stories focused on the Ringling history, along with previews of the convention and the return of the circus after a 15-year absence.

Circus World Museum



This one-sheet lithograph was based on a photograph taken by Harry Atwell and shows Erika Loyal being held in the trunk of an elephant named Yasso, a long-time member of the Ringling herd. Note how the poster uses the slogan World's Greatest Shows, an homage to the original Ringling Bros. circus during its Golden Jubilee season.

Chris Berry Collection

A few days later Joy responded: "I think Mr. Kelley's advice with reference to Mrs. Al. Ringling is good, and I quite agree – let's have a convention without playing up Mrs. Al's honorary membership."³⁷

Mrs. Charles Ringling's influence was growing in the summer of 1933, as Gumpertz shifted his allegiances away from John Ringling and toward the other members of the family who together held a majority stake in the circus.³⁸

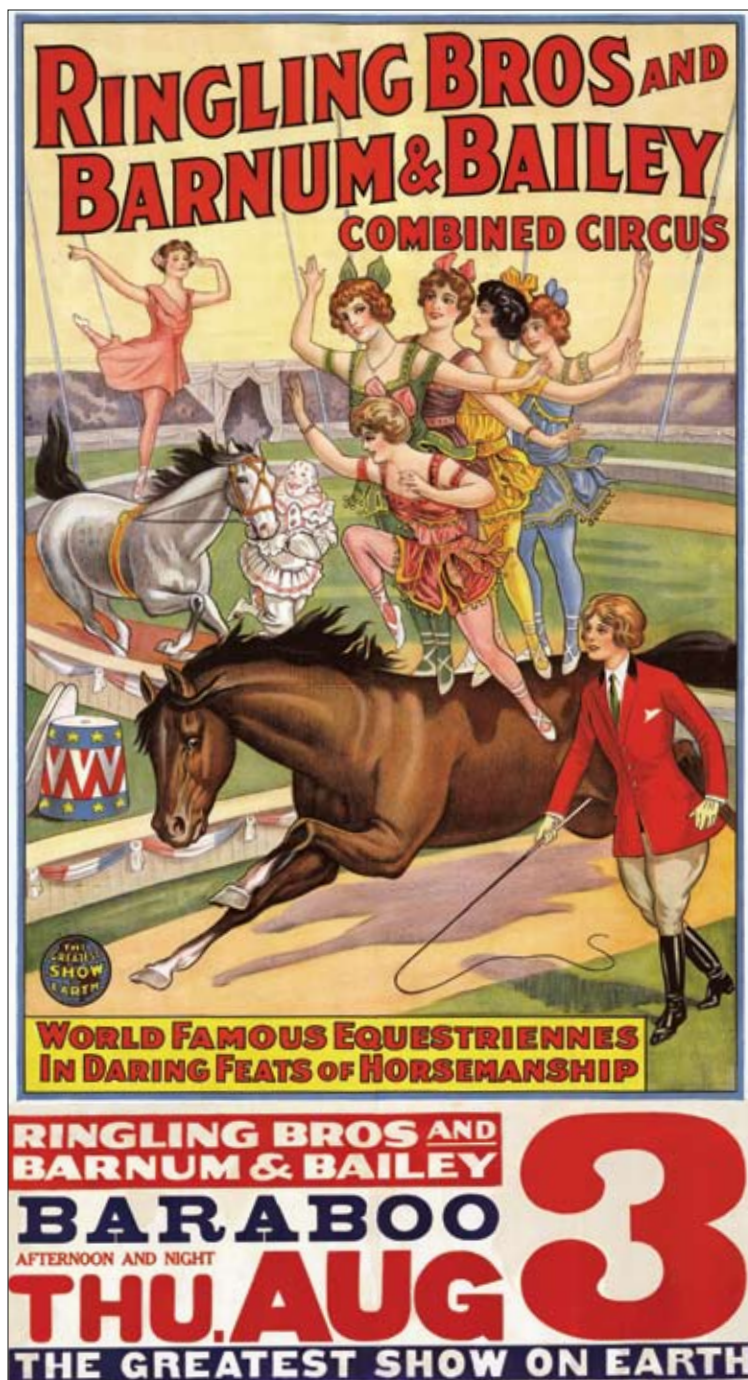
Evidence of Edith Ringling's authority was visible in late July when she attempted to upstage the Baraboo celebration by working with Gumpertz to route the show into the Chicago suburb of Evanston a week before the Wisconsin homecoming. Mrs. Ringling still maintained a summer home in Evanston, and on July 27 the show trains unloaded in the posh lakefront suburb, exhibiting on the grounds of Evanston Township High School.

Although the Evanston performances were designed to honor the relationship that the late Charles Ringling had with his adopted community, the appearance had neither the impact nor did it receive the publicity of the Baraboo date. Less than two-weeks later the circus was scheduled to begin a nine-day stand just 15 miles away on the Chicago Lake Front, and consequently, press and promotion associated with the Evanston date was minimal.³⁹

If newspapers seemed to ignore Evanston's Golden Jubilee performance in late July, the tribulations of John Ringling were front-page news the week before the circus returned to Baraboo. From coast to coast, reporters and columnists wrote that the ailing John Ringling had filed for divorce from his second wife, Emily Haag Buck Ringling in Sarasota. While Ringling's attorney James E. Kirk would not go into detail, he did say that the grounds for divorce were "mental cruelty."⁴⁰ Any possibility that John Ringling would return to Baraboo for the 50th anniversary celebration vanished as his financial challenges mounted, culminating with his personal bankruptcy after the season closed.⁴¹

Meanwhile in Baraboo, final preparations were underway. John M. Kelley, the circus attorney, had been raised in the area and kept a farm there. He spent late July in Baraboo assisting city leaders and convention organizers in advance of the homecoming.

As circus fans began arriving for the three-day convention, they were joined by trapeze artist Alfredo Codona who had been injured in a performance at Madison Square Garden on April 29. Codona, who never performed on the trapeze again, was a sensation with the fans, posing for photographs and making home movies of the convention and the Baraboo performances.⁴²



Although not identified by name, this one sheet lithograph was a representation of the Reiffenach Sisters riding act, a mainstay of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Chris Berry Collection

Nearly 100 circus fans were registered for the CFA Convention. As part of the agenda they toured the old winter quarters and the Walnut Hill Cemetery, along with other circus sites in the Baraboo area. During the business meeting the membership passed a resolution that steps be taken to preserve the Al. Ringling mansion as a circus museum, as the home had been vacant for several years.⁴³

That evening, at the same time the circus was trying to get off the muddy lot in La Crosse, the fans in Baraboo were




Circus attorney and Wisconsin native John M. Kelley (center) took a group of circus fans to the old Baraboo winter quarters during the CFA convention. Seen here in front of the Elephant Barn are Dr. Charles Howland of Des Moines, Iowa (left) and Sam Solinkey of Beaumont, Texas.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

treated to a lavish banquet at the Devi-Bara resort at nearby Devil's Lake. Both Mrs. Charles and Mrs. Al. Ringling were present at the banquet, however they were not seated together. Others at the dinner included Henry Ringling, Jr., and three members of the Gollmar family.⁴⁴

The keynote speaker for the evening was the show's general counsel Kelley, who gave an informal talk on the history of the circus and the Ringling brothers. As he wrapped up his speech he observed why the circus was successful. "The Ringlings born poor?" he said. "No! They were enriched with talents and possessions which few of us know. They possessed the deepest fidelity to purpose and loyalty to each other."⁴⁵

It is doubtful that many of those in town for the convention slept that night as the "Flying Squadron" chugged into the Baraboo railyards just a few hours after the CFA's annual banquet ended.

|  | | | | |
|---|----------------------|-----------|------------------|-------|
| <div> <div>General Office 331 Madison Ave. NEW YORK CITY</div> <div> <div>SEASON</div> <div>1933</div> <div>No. 6</div> </div> <div>Western Office 221 Institute Place CHICAGO, ILL.</div> </div> | | | | |
| <div> <div>OFFICIAL ROUTE</div> <div>ALLOW MAIL ENOUGH TIME TO REACH POINTS NAMED BEFORE DATE GIVEN</div> </div> | | | | |
| DATE | TOWN | STATE | R. R. | MILES |
| July 24 | Muskegon | Michigan | Penna | 40 |
| " 25 | Kalamazoo | " | " | 50 |
| " 26 | South Bend | Indiana | Mich Cent | 76 |
| " 27 | Evanston | Illinois | N Y C-C & N W | 94 |
| " 28 | Milwaukee | Wisconsin | C & N W | 75 |
| " 29 | Madison | " | C M St P & P | 73 |
| SUNDAY | | | | |
| July 31 | Minneapolis | Minnesota | C & N W | 281 |
| Aug. 1 | St. Paul | " | C M St P & P | 10 |
| " 2 | La Crosse | Wisconsin | " | 140 |
| " 3 | Baraboo | " | C & N W | 96 |
| " 4 | Rockford | Illinois | " | 110 |
| " 5 | Chicago (Grant Park) | " | Illinois Central | 90 |
| " 6 | " | " | | |
| " 7 | " | " | | |
| " 8 | " | " | | |
| " 9 | " | " | | |
| " 10 | " | " | | |
| " 11 | " | " | | |
| " 12 | " | " | | |
| " 13 | " | " | | |
| Total Miles to date | | | | 6355 |

Although Baraboo was one of the smallest towns on the 1933 tour, the Ringling's hometown delivered one of the biggest days at the ticket wagon.

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The four trains that arrived that morning were made up of 40 flat cars, 23 stock cars and 25 coaches. The circus had paid the Chicago and North Western Railroad \$1,229.00 in advance to move the 88 cars from La Crosse to Baraboo, the equivalent of about \$23,500 in 2018.⁴⁶

As the working men jumped from flats and performers left their sleepers, they were astonished by the enormous crowds in the railyard. Soon the familiar red wagons began rumbling through town and the long-awaited arrival of the circus took on the appearance of a massive family reunion, as many of those still with the show had lived in Baraboo when it was winter quarters and were returning for the first time since 1918.⁴⁷

Even those who had distant ties to the Ringlings were feted.

Among those who received noto-

riety on circus day were the five Berkley brothers; John, William, Fred, Frank and Wilbur. The five, all residents of Baraboo, had been among those who had attended the first show 50 years before as children, and now they were among the crowd attending the homecoming performance.⁴⁸

The huge crowds lured to Baraboo by the celebration reportedly swelled the population to three times its normal size, as those living in nearby towns and rural farms joined in the celebration. Once the train was unloaded, thousands of them moved to the Sauk County Fairgrounds where they watched boss canvasman Jim Whalen supervise the construction of the tent city.⁴⁹

As many as 2,000 people were on hand for the pre-dawn arrival of the circus trains on the morning of August 3. The 1933 train consisted of 88 cars in four sections. The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad charged the circus \$1,229.00 to move the show from La Crosse to Baraboo.

Chris Berry Collection





After an absence of 15 years, the familiar red wagons again rumbled over the streets of Baraboo on the morning of August 3, traveling past the Sauk County Courthouse on

their way from the Chicago and Northwestern rail yards to the fairgrounds on the eastern edge of town.

Circus World Museum

Another veteran on hand that day was legendary press agent Dexter Fellows, who had spent decades promoting not only the Combined Shows, but also Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Barnum & Bailey prior to the Ringling acquisition. With a story idea in mind, he took a group of newspaper reporters to the old winter quarters to show them around. As trainer William Emery was moving the elephant herd across the new Broadway bridge and toward Fourth Street enroute to the fairgrounds, the elephants suddenly became "exceedingly restive." Richard Davis, a staff reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal*, described what happened next:

"Dutch, Hattie, Modoc and Will suddenly bolted. They bolted, with Bill Emery after them, and ran – where do you think? To the old winter quarters of the Ringling shows. They had sniffed the scents of old familiar smells.

"And that's not all. When they had reached the shed and contentedly were fondling their specific tethering posts, Modoc had a further recollection. He stretched to the rafters with his trunk and pulled down a nickel bag of peanuts, which had been there not less than 30 years. No wonder Baraboo never forgets."⁵⁰

Whether the peanuts had been there for 30 years, or merely 30 minutes, press agent Dexter Fellows did his job, planting a story that was splashed across newspapers nationwide.

Although a circus parade had been planned for noon, the tremendous crowds made it impossible to negotiate a route to downtown. Still, Merle Evans and the circus band made their way to the square where they played a one-hour concert, and after the matinee performance a group of elephants were walked through the downtown area as a preview of evening show.⁵¹

At noon, two hours before the afternoon show was scheduled to begin, the midway was so jammed with eager fans that the doors were opened early. By 12:30, the unreserved "blues" were at capacity, but the crowds kept coming. Once the reserved seats were filled, hundreds of additional ticket holders were held in the menagerie until the opening spec, "The Durbar of Delhi," was complete. It was only then that remaining customers were allowed into the big top and seated on straw that had been spread on the hippodrome track. Despite the "straw house," an estimated 5,000 people were turned away from the matinee performance.⁵²



In a scene repeated each day, the six giant big top center poles were raised up as the big top canvas crew began the job of building the canvas city. Note the large pile of sawdust

on the right-hand side of the photograph. Once the tent was up, sawdust was spread under the canvas in advance of the matinee performance.

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The arrival of the circus brought hundreds to the Sauk County Fairgrounds who mobbed the lot even before the side show and other tents were set up. The massive traffic

jam created near the fairgrounds forced the cancellation of a parade through Baraboo as there was not enough space to organize the wagons, horses, elephants and floats.

Circus World Museum



Even before the tents were in place, hundreds of spectators swarmed the Sauk County Fairgrounds. Many brought picnic

lunches to the lot, spending the day observing the setup and other activities of The Greatest Show on Earth.

Circus World Museum

As those without reserved seats were clamoring to get into the big top, the CFA members were invited into the cookhouse. The performers and staff had already completed their lunch, but the fans were served the same fare of cold meats, a can of sardines, potato salad, a sliced egg, tomato, lettuce, cheese and rice pudding. Among those participating in the cookhouse luncheon were Charles Ringling's son Robert, his wife Virginia and their son Jimmy. Another honored guest in the cookhouse was Wisconsin Governor Schmedeman who made the trip from Madison to attend the performance.⁵³

Shortly after lunch, Merle Evans blew his cornet in the backyard and those with reserved seats made their way into the tent where John Kelley welcomed the crowd to the Golden Jubilee. In his remarks, Kelley related some of the history of the Ringlings and the Baraboo connection, and told the assembled crowd they were part of the largest matinee audience in two years.⁵⁴

Among the other dignitaries who spoke at the afternoon performance were United States Senator Robert La Follette, Jr. and Governor Schmedeman. As he spoke, Senator La Follette told of his own experiences growing up near the Ringling winter quarters, and the fact that his mother, Belle

Case La Follette had taught school to the Ringling brothers. His mother, once wrote, "...when John Ringling read a long account of the side shows he and other boys had been giving every night, I lectured him and drew the moral that if John would put his mind on his lessons as he did on side shows, he might yet become a scholar. FORTUNATELY, the scolding had no effect."⁵⁵

Governor Schmedeman, who played a role in securing the commitment of the circus to come to Baraboo also spoke, saying, "Any institution that for so long a time has created so much happiness and joy for children deserves a tribute of appreciation and congratulation...I do it in my own name. I do it in the name of all the children everywhere who have laughed at your clowns and held their breaths at acrobats floating through the air."⁵⁶

The Governor then made reference to the current political climate, saying "among the real New Deals, the *Greatest Show on Earth* is giving one of the best."⁵⁷ He then closed his remarks by toasting the future of the circus, with his prediction that, "...for many more half centuries and centuries, Ringling Bros. will still be able to give joy to young and old."⁵⁸

Although ticket sales for the evening performance did

Following the evening performance, the CFA held an after-party at the old Ringling winter quarters where the circus performers and executives were toasted with 3.2% "near beer." The low alcohol beverage was a popular alternative to liquor during Prohibition.

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not match the afternoon's straw-house, the circus fans in Baraboo for the convention attended the show as a group. Prior to the performance Merle Evans and the band paid tribute to the fans by playing a new composition titled "Harper Joy's Triumphal" to honor the CFA president. As the march concluded, Joy started the program by blowing a whistle originally used by Al. Ringling and presented to him by Lou Ringling at the banquet the night before.⁵⁹

Among the performers singled out by the locals were Ed and Jennie Rooney, who grew up in the Baraboo area and had maintained a home there even after the circus relocated to Bridgeport at the end of the 1918 season. The two trapeze artists received tremendous ovations from their hometown neighbors and were presented with large bouquets of flowers at both performances.⁶⁰

In most towns, performers would be eager to get to the runs as soon as their act concluded, but that was not the case in Baraboo. Shortly after the performance ended, a special "Dutch Lunch" was held at the old Ringlingville winter quarters. Long tables were set up on a grassy area between the barns and the river and sandwiches and low-alcohol content beer was served under a full moon to a crowd of about 500. As a German band provided entertainment, performers, fans and Baraboo residents mingled until the circus trains began to pull out for Rockford, Illinois well after midnight.⁶¹

As celebrants drank "near beer" brewed by Ferd Effinger, the new owner of the Ringlingville winter quarters, the day's ticket receipts were being tallied. Although some newspapers reported that as many as 25,000 patrons attended the Baraboo performances, the ledgers for the 1933 season, now at Circus World Museum's Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center, confirm that although it was one of the biggest days of the season, the 25,000 number was inflated. The matinee performance drew 11,385 and another 2,733 saw the 8:00 P.M. show. The total day's gross for tickets to the main performance, the sideshows and concessions was \$25,504.09. Adjusted for inflation the Baraboo date generated the equivalent of about \$490,000 in 2018 dollars.⁶²

From a revenue perspective, Baraboo was the 12th biggest day of the season. The income from the afternoon performance that day was the 8th highest of the year, with only one date outside of New York that generated more revenue, and that was in Miami on October 25, the final day of the season. The total gross revenue for the 1933 Golden Jubilee tour was \$2,532,500. When adjusted for inflation this is the equivalent to about \$48 million in 2018.⁶³



When the trains left for Rockford early on the morning of August 4 it seemed unlikely that *The Greatest Show on Earth* would ever return to the small town where the Ringling brothers first struck out for fame and fortune. The world was changing, and so was the circus.

As the decade ended, a new generation of Ringlings took control. In the years that followed new features were added and old traditions faded away until finally on a summer night in Pittsburgh, the scene which had played out in Baraboo and hundreds of other cities and towns, vanished forever as Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey lowered its big top for the last time.

John M. Kelley, the circus attorney who had been instrumental in bringing the Golden Jubilee tour to Baraboo, was 83 years old when John Ringling North closed the show in 1956, but he still had one more job ahead of him. Although he was no longer on the circus payroll, it was now his vision to bring the Ringlings back home.

In the days leading up to the 1933 Baraboo homecoming, Kelley had been a skeptic, afraid that the town of 5,500 would not deliver at the ticket wagon, but when the circus arrived on that beautiful August morning he became a believer. Kelley saw the pride and admiration that Baraboo still had for the Ringlings, and in his final years he devoted his life to building a circus museum there. On July 1, 1959 Kelley's dream became a reality, and Circus World opened where Ringling Bros. had once wintered on the banks of the Baraboo River.

Since opening, Circus World Museum has grown from an acre of land with eight old circus wagons to a 64-acre complex with more than 30 permanent structures and over 200 historic wagons, along with live circus performances. It is a living legacy to the Ringling brothers and the history of the circus.

Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple, once said, "you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking back." When it comes to the legacy left behind by the Ringling brothers there are quite a few dots that can be connected between 1918 and 2018, but many of them can be found on August 3, 1933. Sverre Braathen and Harper Joy dreamed of the Golden Jubilee homecom-

Town BARABOO WIS. Date AUG. 3 1933

AFTERNOON

| | | | |
|------------------------|--|----------|-----------|
| Yellow Wagon - - - - - | | | |
| Red Wagon - - - - - | | 5.412.25 | |
| 7291 @ 75c. 5.468.25 | | | |
| 2543 @ 50c. 1.271.50 | | 6.739.75 | |
| Door Cash - - - - - | | 277 | |
| Inside - - - - - | | 2.091.25 | |
| Downtown | | | |
| 1142 @ 75c. 856.50 | | | |
| 409 @ 50c. 204.50 | | 1.061 | 15.981.25 |

EVENING

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|--|---------|-----------|
| Yellow Wagon - - - - - | | 2.802 - | |
| Red Wagon - - - - - | | | |
| 2248 @ 75c. 1.686 | | 1.859 | |
| 346 @ 50c. 173. | | 18060 | |
| Door Cash - - - - - | | 1.00050 | |
| Inside - - - - - | | | |
| Downtown | | | |
| 70 @ 75c. 52.50 | | 6250 | |
| 120 @ 50c. 10 | | | |
| Back Door | | | |
| 47 @ 75c. 35.25 | | 3625 | 5.940.85 |
| 2 @ 50c. 1. | | | |
| Concert Afternoon - <u>NONE</u> | | | |
| Side Show - - - - - | | 1.50575 | |
| Balloons - - - - - | | 8260 | |
| Candy - - - - - | | 71285 | |
| Lunch Car - - - - - | | 36.49 | |
| Lunch Tent | | 9 | |
| <u>BUGS</u> | | 10 | |
| <u>LOT SPACE</u> | | | |
| <u>Group Insurance</u> | | 469. | |
| <u>Commissary</u> | | 1.15630 | 3.981.99 |
| | | | 25.504.09 |
| TOTAL, | | | |
| Night Concert - - - - - | | | |
| TOTAL FOR DAY, | | | |

ing. Samuel Gumpertz authorized it, and because of John M. Kelley's passion, 100 years after leaving their hometown the Ringlings and Baraboo are now inextricably bound.

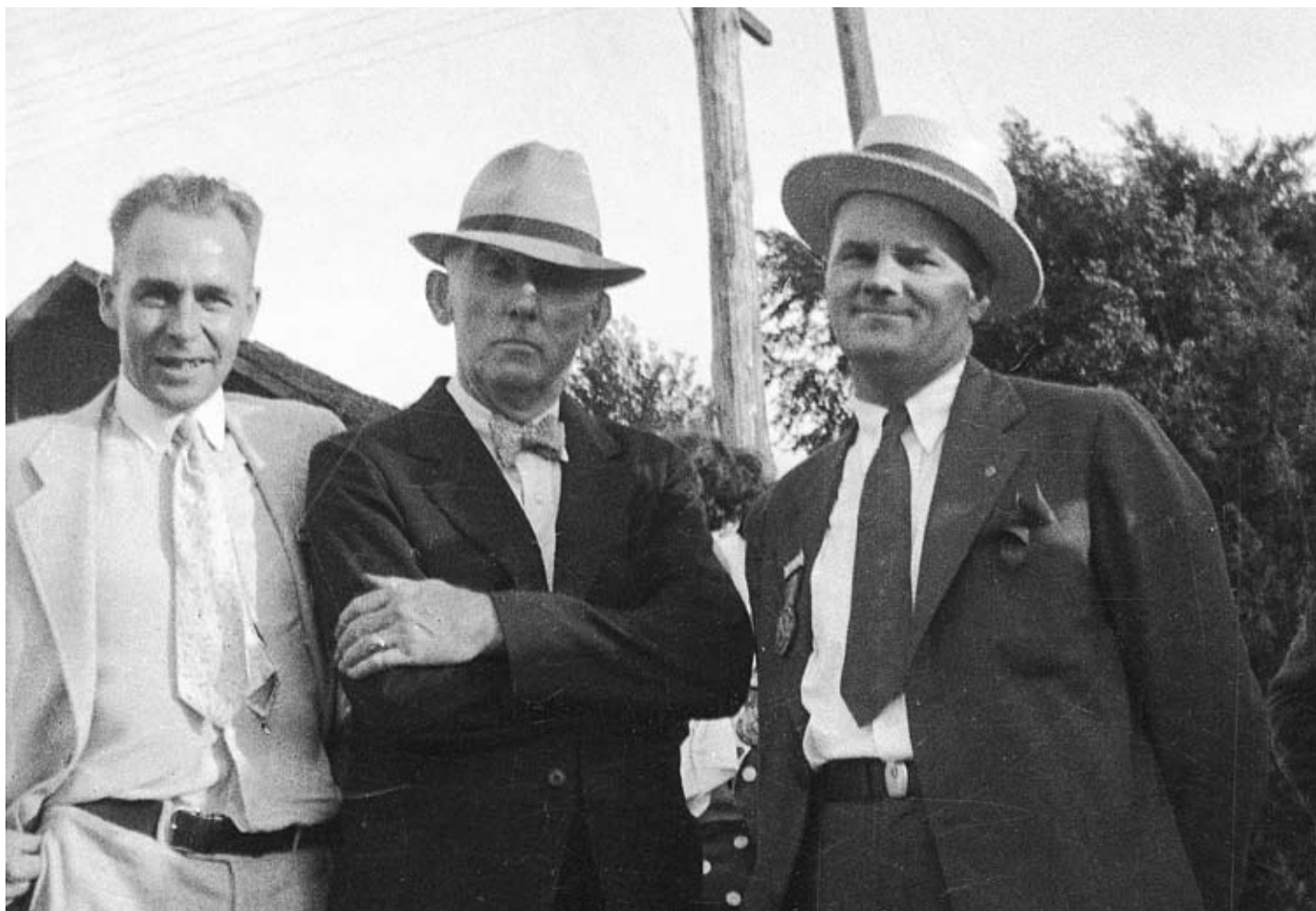
The Prodigal Sons are home. **BW**

Acknowledgements

The Return of the Prodigal Sons - Baraboo and the Golden Jubilee was written with the assistance and support of Bob Amon, Maureen Brunsdale, Joe and Carmen Colossa, Fred Dahlinger, Jennifer Lemmer Posey, Greg Parkinson, Julie Parkinson, Nancy Parkinson, Fred Pfening III, Jack Rennert, Mark Schmitt, Peter Shrake, and Timothy Tegge. Finally, it was the passion and dedication of Sverre and Faye Braathen that made the Baraboo homecoming a success. Without their detailed record keeping and photographs, this story could not have been fully told.

Receipts for August 3 totaled \$25,504.09, the second highest grossing day of the 1933 season under-canvas. More money was generated during one day in Baraboo than any single day in much larger cities such as Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis and Washington, D.C.

Circus World Museum



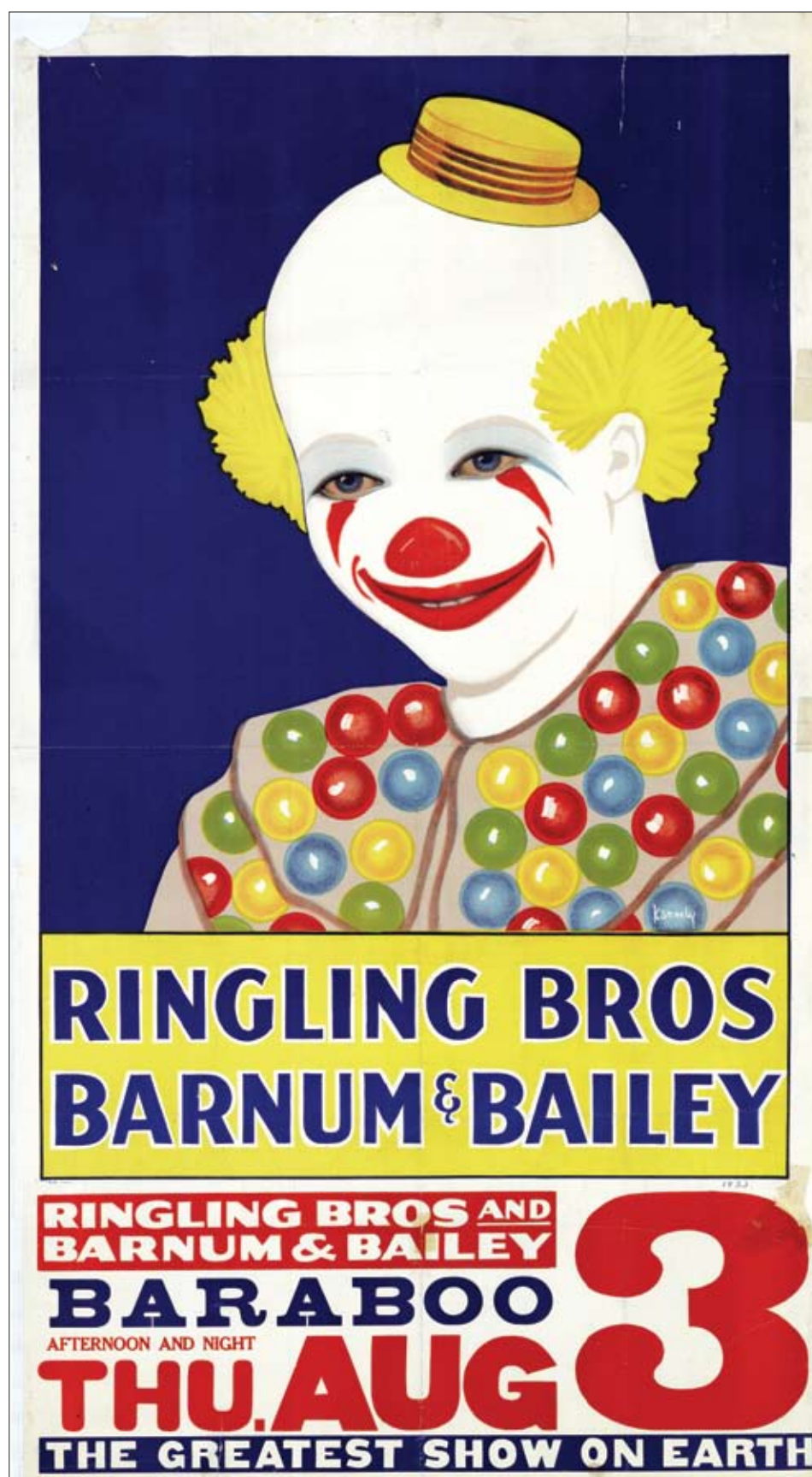
The success in Baraboo was due in great measure to the dedication of (left to right) circus fan Sverre Braathen, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey General Counsel John M. Kelley, and CFA President Harper Joy. The three worked for months to ensure the homecoming was a red-letter day for the circus.

Illinois State University Milner Library Special Collections

Endnotes

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8. "Gumpertz is Named Ringling Circus Boss," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 15, 1932, p.1.
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This lithograph, produced by Central Printing and Illinois Litho., provided a much more contemporary design than many of the circus posters created in the 1930s. The portrait is based on the makeup of Felix Adler, one of the headliners in the clown alley of 1933.

Circus World Museum

With an Illustrator's Eye



The photography of Karl Knecht

By Pete Shrake

All photographs in this article are courtesy of
Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research
Center, Circus World Museum



Karl Knecht shakes hands with giant George Auger near the Ringling-Barnum backdoor during a 1921 performance at Freeport, Illinois.

Karl Knecht loved the circus. In fact, he was a common sight whenever any circus came through his hometown of Evansville, Indiana. In 1924, he was on the Ringling showgrounds early in the morning watching the men set up the tents when Stanley Dawson, one of the ticket sellers, caught sight of the wide-eyed man. "Circus

Local boys recruited to help with the circus setup prepare to unload jacks and stringers from a Gentry Bros. Circus wagon in 1922.



that was the story as Knecht told it. He would know – he was in fact member No. 4 of the group.¹

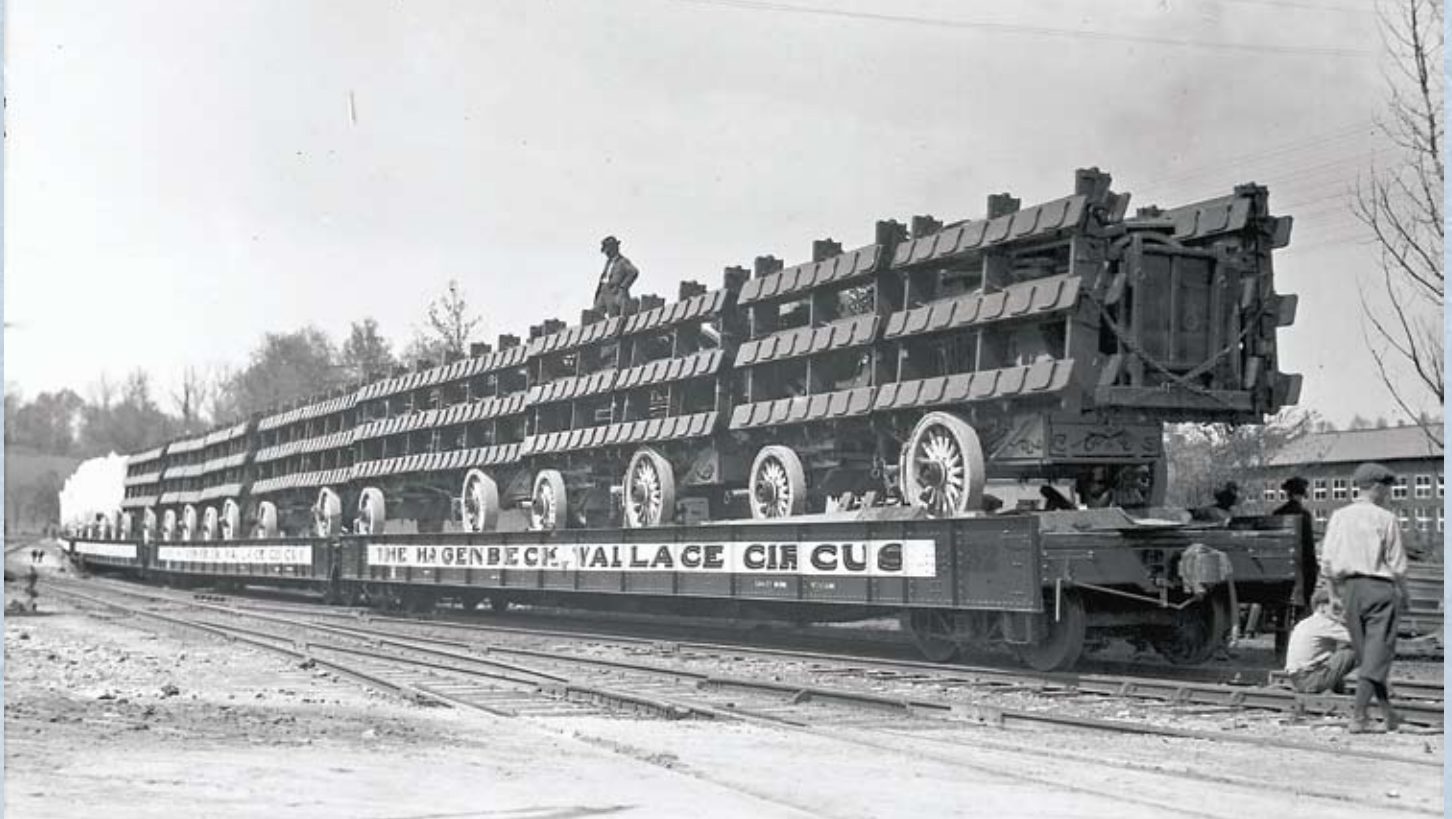
By the time he helped form the CFA, Knecht was already established as a nationally recognized editorial cartoonist. From his office at the *Evansville Courier* he drew detailed illustrated commentaries on local and national politics, but he would also from time to time touch upon his favorite subject – the circus.² His work was widely regarded, and even presidents appreciated it. Harry Truman in

Three female performers rush across the backyard to change costumes in the dressing tent during a matinee performance of the Al G. Barnes Circus in 1922.

nuts like you ought to get together," he told Knecht. An astonished Knecht replied, "Are there other people who make a hobby of the circus too?" Dawson provided him a list of other avid fans. Thus was the beginning of the Circus Fans Association of America, or at least

A view of lion cage wagon No. 7 as Hagenbeck-Wallace employees position a shifting den at the winter quarters in West Baden, Indiana, 1923.





Seven Curtis seat wagons are loaded on railroad flatcars near the Hagenbeck-Wallace winter quarters at West Baden, Indiana, 1923.

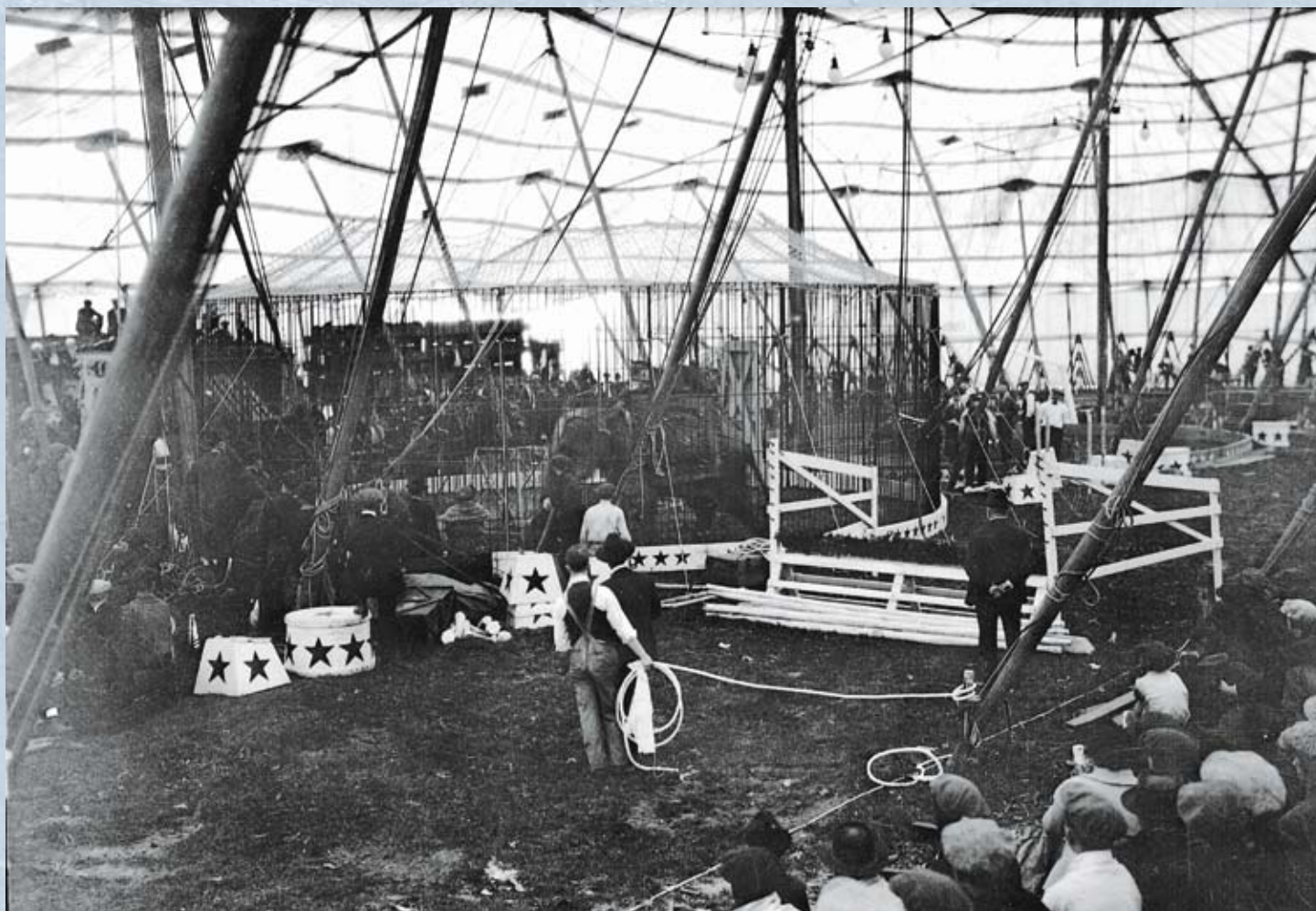


This photo of a Curtis Canvas Spool Wagon hitched to ten horses is thought to have been taken at the Hagenbeck-Wallace winter quarters in the spring of 1923 as the show was preparing for the new season. During the season, the high count of horses would have been needed when the wagon was loaded with wet canvas.

particular was so fond of one cartoon depicting the Democrats defeating the Republicans in a recent election that he asked Knecht for the original and hung it in the White House.³

Knecht would apply his experience working with news-

papers to his circus activities as well. At the second annual banquet of the CFA in West Baden, Indiana, he unveiled a new publication *Chatter from Around the White Tops*, later simply known as *The White Tops*. Knecht would serve as its first editor and continue in that role until 1934, shepherding



The interior of the Hagenbeck-Wallace big top is seen during a rehearsal prior to the season's opening performance at Louisville, Kentucky in 1923. Note the tiger riding on the elephant's back within the steel-bound arena.



A group of men and boys watch as the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus train passes by during the arrival in 1923.



A "pull-over team" of horses moves a tableau wagon across a railroad flat car, 1923.



A man uses a snubbing post to control the descent of a canvas-covered Hagenbeck-Wallace wagon as it begins going down the runs in 1923.



A pair of elephants begin to "pull the peaks" of the Hagenbeck-Wallace big top during a 1923 set up. The clean white canvas indicates this photo was taken early in the season, perhaps on opening day.



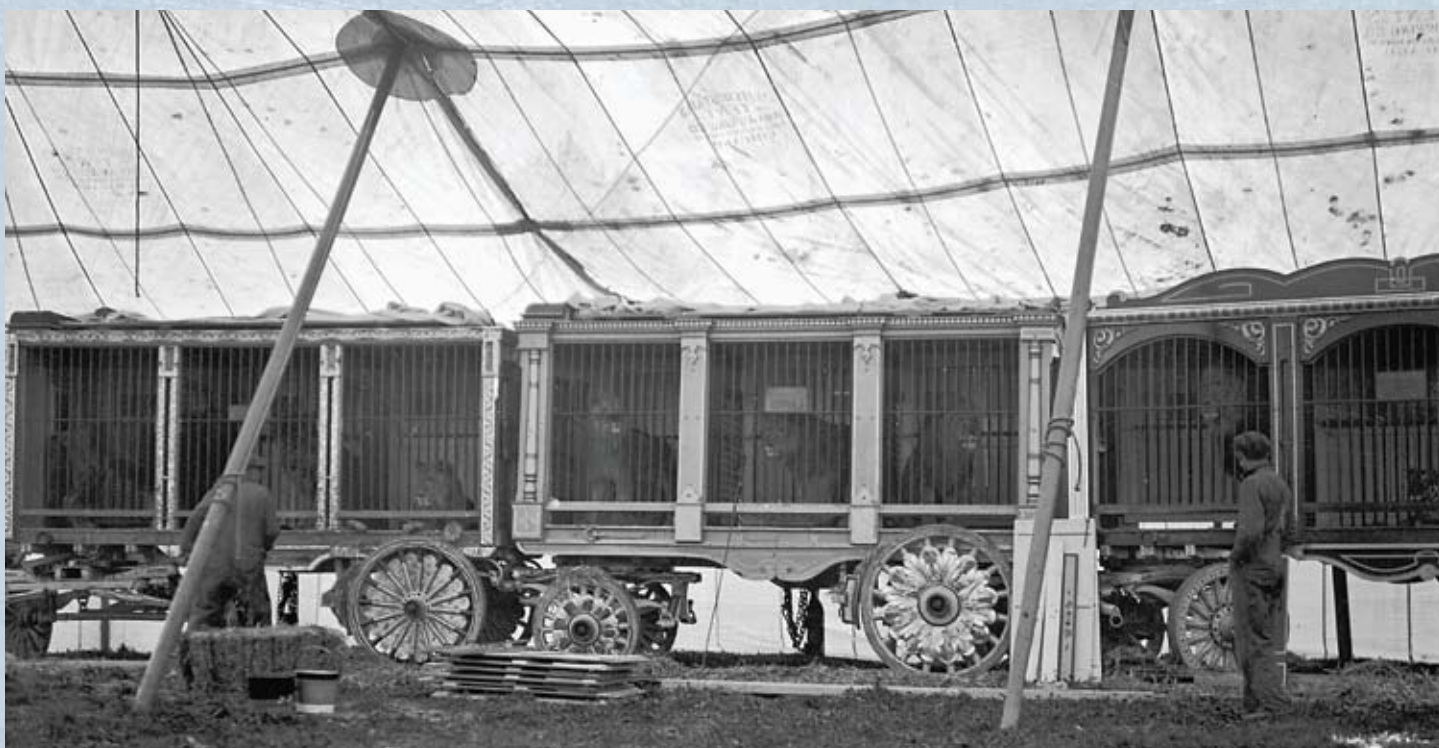
A crowd watches as Hagenbeck-Wallace elephants and camels parade by in a residential neighborhood in 1923. Up ahead, a cage wagon turns the corner just left of center.



A pair of tandem zebra teams hitched to two wheeled carts walk down a city street during a parade of the Al G. Barnes Circus, c. 1921.



Performers and staff are viewed in this 1921 photo of an area within the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey dining tent.



Three cage wagons containing lions are in place inside the Hagenbeck-Wallace menagerie tent in 1923. Note the decorative sunburst wheels on each cage. Several stamps on the canvas above the wagons record the maker as the United States Tent and Awning Co.

the magazine from a simple four-page to a 16-page publication, the title banner art drawn by Knecht himself.

From an early age Knecht was a natural artist, a skill he picked up from his father. His exposure to the circus started as a boy growing up in Freeport, Illinois. He would visit every circus that came to town. He created the Knecht and

Becker Circus, a backyard affair with local kids and siblings joining in, much to the despair of the neighbors. One of the boys performed a high dive act leaping from a 12-foot ladder into a makeshift fish tank. It was a great act until, as a friend remembered, "A neighbor woman called the police and stopped the act as too dangerous."⁴ However, it was when



The three-pole big top of Honest Bill Shows is the center of focus of this 1922 Knecht photo. The circus was one of the country's earliest truck shows.



This 1921 view of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey midway shows a concession wagon (one of the earliest ever to travel with a circus) identified by the lettering "A Sip and a Bite" along with its staff.



A crowd of people mill about the midway of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1924.



A crowd gathers on the midway of the John Robinson Circus in 1922. Note the concession stand advertising Cracker Jack.



The men's doniker (pit toilet) in the side-walled area just off the connection between the Ringling-Barnum big top and menagerie, 1920.

he was a student at the Art Institute of Chicago that he really developed a profound love of the circus. To help pay for tuition, Knecht worked as an usher in a theater. Exposure to the various theatrical and vaudeville shows inspired a deep appreciation for the performance arts. With this background, it is easy to see why Knecht became such an avid fan.⁵

Over 320 photographs taken by Knecht can be found at Circus World Museum's Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center, a donation by Fred Pfening in 2014. Knecht was perhaps not the most skilled photographer. Some of his images are slightly out of focus. But he had an artist's eye for unusual angles and for whimsical scenes, capturing the circus train as it whizzed by a crowd of local kids as it came into town, or taking pictures of the inside of the men's doniker.

Knecht's circus images date as early as 1917 and cover 20 years touching on nearly every aspect of circus life from performances outdoors and inside the big top, to railroad scenes and views all around the showgrounds. Many of his images capture Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus or Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, but smaller shows



Male circus employees could get a haircut and/or shave in the barber tent located in the backlot of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey during the early 1920s.



Three small tents and several awnings shade wire-mesh cages for Alf Loyal's performing dogs on The Greatest Show on Earth, 1921.

also attracted Knecht's eye. Images of both Honest Bill Shows and Gentry Bros. appear in the collection.

Sometimes Knecht let his passion for the circus get the better of him. He would often don makeup and a baggy costume to roam the showgrounds as a clown. Knecht may have been a "circus nut," but he was an affable circus nut and the joy he found in the circus is palpable. It was a joy that came through in those early pages of *White Tops* and in his photography, which remain today as an interesting record of the circus at a time when it loomed large in the public consciousness. **BW**



Karl Kae Knecht (left) sits next to Ringling-Barnum clown Pat Valdo, 1921.

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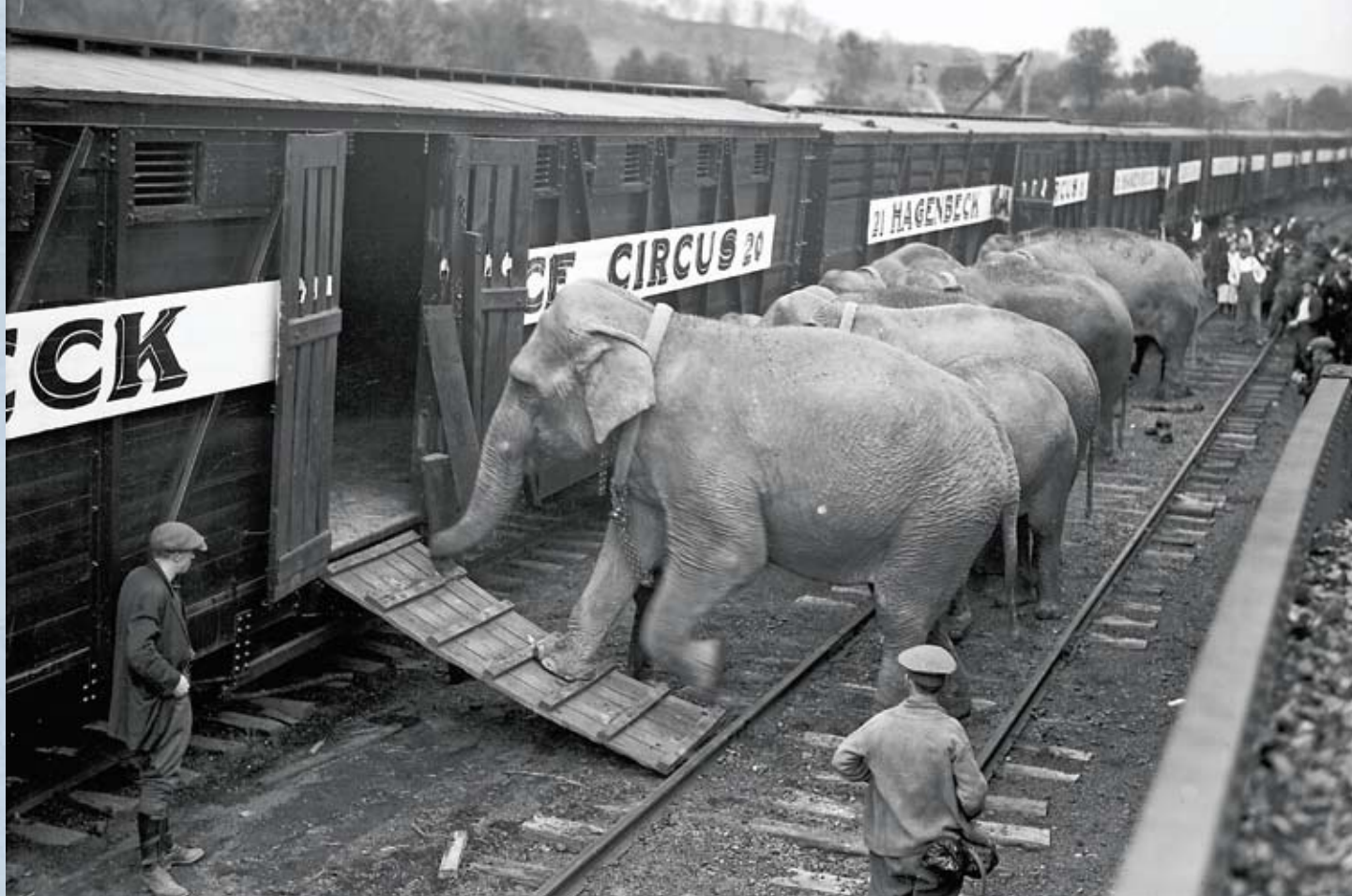
Units of the Al G. Barnes Circus spec prepare to enter the big top during a performance in Evansville, Indiana in 1920.



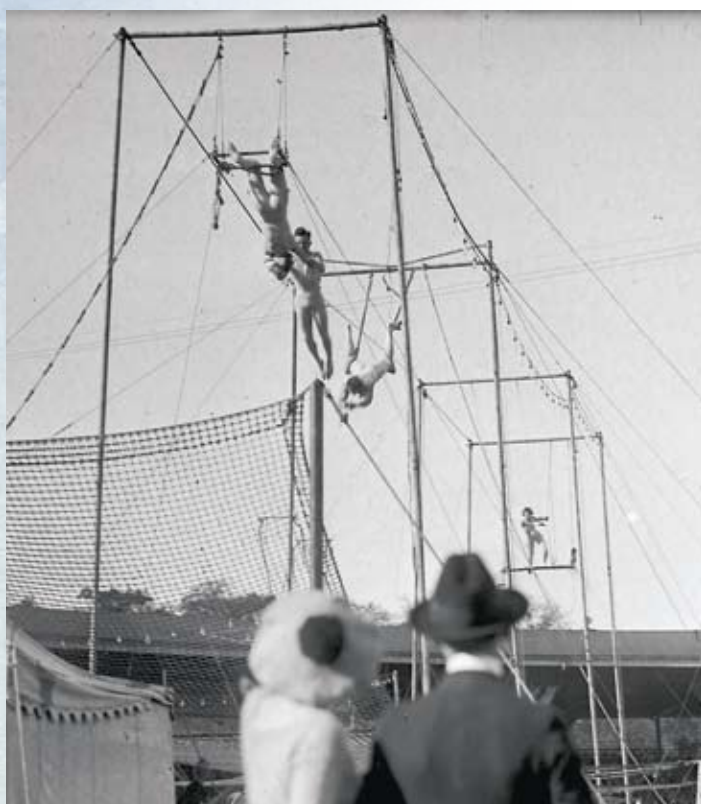
Equestrian Director Fred Bradna and his wife Ella Bradna walking out of the backdoor, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1921.



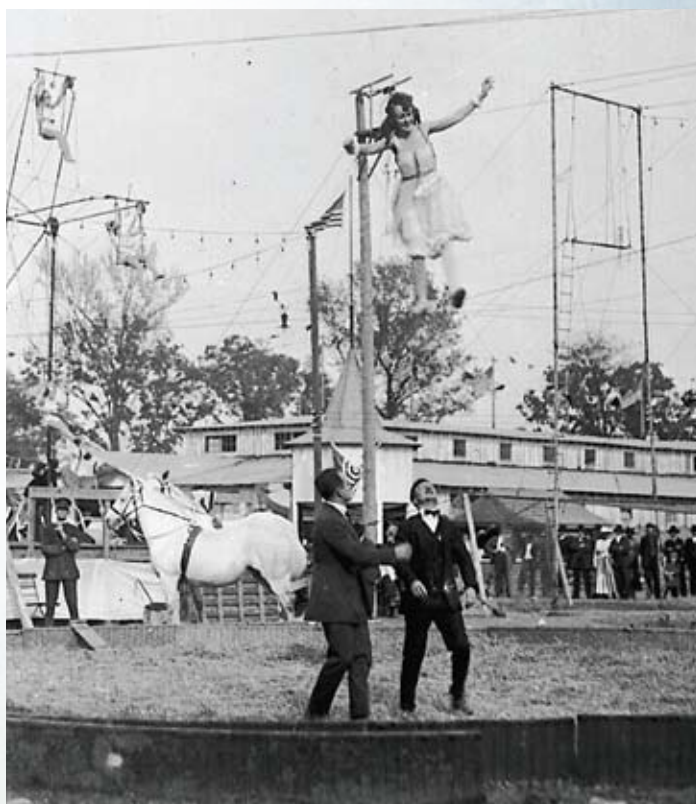
An unidentified woman poses on a four-wheel cart in the Al G. Barnes backlot in Evansville, Indiana in 1920. Note that the horse and cart display numerous birds.



The show's elephants are about to be loaded into a Hagenbeck-Wallace railroad car, 1923.



Members of the Codona family identified as flyer Alfredo, Lalo (the catcher in the foreground), Victoria on the platform, and "middle catcher" Eduardo performing their flying return act in an open-air arena in 1918.



Victoria Codona performs her slack-wire act while her father Eduardo and brother Alfredo "spot" her from below. Knecht took this photo in 1918 during a performance at Garvin Park in Evansville, Indiana.

Living History

The 2018 CHS Convention in Baraboo, Wisconsin

by Jennifer Lemmer Posey

The 2018 CHS convention was one of the largest and most successful gatherings of our group in recent memory. All told over 140 registrants enjoyed four days packed with activities and fellowship in Baraboo, Wisconsin, a community steeped in circus culture past and present. Among the slate of excellent speakers were leaders from the civic and cultural groups that are invested in preserving the rich circus history of Baraboo and the state of Wisconsin.

The entire program was set forth in a specially produced, 16-page illustrated program, the finest issued in CHS history, which incorporated a comprehensive driving tour of Baraboo circus heritage sites. Although official

convention events did not commence until the evening, attendees began filtering into the ballroom of the Al. Ringling Mansion early in the day on Wednesday, July 18. Under the supervision of Steve and Dawnne Flint and Ralph and Joan Pierce, the registration process was quick and the ballroom made a perfect setting for the more important business of renewing acquaintances and cutting up jackpots.

An add-on option of self-guided tours of three of the



Dave SaLoutos entertains attendees at the opening reception at Circus World Museum.



Ringling homes (Al Ringling, Salome, and Charles Ringling) along with an optional tour of the Al. Ringling Theatre with a special program by Paul Wolter, gave many a special behind the scenes look at the spaces that defined the Ringling family's relationship to Baraboo. Other attendees opted to spend their afternoon enjoying shows, exploring the grounds and exhibitions at Circus World Museum or researching in the Robert L. Parkinson Library. A new edition of Ralph and Joan Pierce's Baraboo cemetery circus interments, provided to registrants, enabled memorial visits to showfolks of the past, while trustees gathered to chart the future for the CHS in their meeting.

The convention truly sprang to life with the first official event, an evening reception and dinner at Circus World Museum's Irvin Feld Exhibit Hall & Visitor Center, sponsored by Keith and Priscilla Webb. The meal was accompanied by a welcome from Circus World Executive Director Scott O'Donnell and a musical presentation by Dave SaLoutos.

CHS board member Julie Parkinson (left) with performer and guest speaker, Colleen Pages.



Don Covington, President of the Circus Historical Society Board of Directors, greets attendees on the first evening.

photo by Ralph Pierce



Circus World Executive Director Scott O'Donnell welcomes the group to Baraboo.

photo by Donna Lee Dicksson

Following the meal, introductions and warm welcomes were extended by O'Donnell and Dave Anderson, Chair of Circus World Museum Foundation Inc.'s Board of Directors. This was followed by Colleen Pages, who shared insights on her life growing up in a remarkable circus family, working with animals, and pursuing her own circus dreams. Her presentation was made all the more meaningful only two weeks later, when the Pages family announced the closing of their show.

The first evening concluded with an extraordinary screening of some of the home movies filmed on the 1930s lots of the Ringling show by famed aerialist Alfredo Codona. These films, which came into the collection of performer and historian Tim Tegge by way of the Codona family, were

recently digitized and feature such stars as Con Colleano, Lucita Leers, Lillian Leitzel, Jack LeClair, and Felix Adler. Among them was the earliest known color footage of American circus activity.

The schedule for the first full day of the gathering called for an early start and a day jam-packed with speakers on a variety of subjects, which followed a welcome from Baraboo mayor Mike Palm. Maureen Brunsdale, CHS Board Member and head of special collections at Illinois State University, set a high bar as she managed to keep her diverse slate of six speakers on schedule. Chris Berry and Tim Tegge's back-to-back presentations started the day by transporting the group back to 1933 and the return of the Ringling circus



Tim Tegge, Kim Baston, Chris Berry, Erin McCabe, Joe Dobrow, and Dick Moore presented in the first session at the Al. Ringling Mansion with presidet Maureen Brunsdale.

photo by Ralph Pierce



Carmen Torres Colossa, Janet Davis, Amelia Osterud, Sarah Chapman, Vanessa Toulmin, Kat Vecchio and Sakina Hughes made up the first all-women session at a CHS convention, with presider Jennifer Lemmer Posey. photo by Ralph Pierce

to Baraboo for the celebration of the show's Golden Jubilee. New member Joe Dobrow discussed the differing marketing strategies for Barnum & Bailey's *Greatest Show on Earth* under the guidance of press agent Tody Hamilton and Buffalo Bill's Wild West under promoter Major John Burke. This was followed by a rousing presentation from Dr. Kim Baston who traveled from Australia to share her research on the

music composed for John Bill Ricketts and contemporaries performing in Edinburgh before the equestrian brought circus to the States. Dr. Baston was kind enough to perform a few of the pieces on the upright piano, providing the audience a sense of the pacing of the riding act that was first seen in Philadelphia in 1793. The next presenter, Erin McCabe, another newcomer to CHS, discussed her work with



CHS members enjoy a reception at the Jacob van Orden Mansion.

photo by Ralph Pierce



Keith Webb, whose uncle owned the Russell Bros. Circus, enjoyed an informal gathering at the Little Village Café.

photo by Donna Lee Dicksson

databases and described interesting patterns and historical relationships with the information captured in circus route books. As an example, McCabe described the movements of the 1863 Gardner & Hemmings Circus in relation to the movements of Confederate troops in Kentucky and Ohio. The final presenter of the morning, Richard Moore gave an entertaining and interactive presentation from his marvelous collection of magic lantern slides.

The afternoon session, composed of an equally ambitious array of speakers guided by this writer, represented a first for CHS Conventions – an all-woman panel that kicked



Kathy Maher, Director of the Barnum Museum, presided over the third session of speakers.

photo by Donna Lee Dicksson

off with opening remarks from Stephanie Miller-Lamb, Director of the Al. Ringling Theatre. Dr. Janet Davis presented a sketch of the life of Mollie Bailey, “Circus Queen of the Southwest,” alluding as much to how difficult it can be to track down the true stories of circus women as she did to the history of the show owner herself. Documentary filmmaker Kat Vecchio described the important roles of circus women including equestriennes Josie DeMott and Dorothy Herbert as well as tiger trainer Mable Stark in the early history of stand-in stunt performers. The presentations next turned to clowning as Prof. Vanessa Toulmin from the University of Sheffield shared an overview of the career of Lulu Adams, the beautiful female clown who began her career in Blackpool and came to Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bai-



Convention attendees had several opportunities to see Circus World Museum's exhibits and live programming including the comedy/variety show presented by Ryan Combs (at left) and Steve Copeland in the Moeller Hippodrome.

photo by Donna Lee Dicksson

ley in the 1940s. Following the theme of circus as a space for individual empowerment, Amelia Osterud discussed the (sometimes fictional) narratives that were used to explain early tattooed performers. Dr. Sakina Hughes discussed the traveling shows, and most specifically the minstrel bands, as a venue for black artists in the early 20th century. The afternoon's final two performers, Sarah Chapman and Carmen Torres Colossa gave their distinct perspectives on how traveling with *The Greatest Show on Earth* had shaped their lives.



Dr. Jeanne-Yvonne and Dr. Gerard Borg presented images from their collection relating to Buffalo Bill's Wild West and that show's European tours. photo by Donna Lee Dicksson

Following a reception at the Jacob van Orden Mansion, which included a raucous entry by Ralph Pierce representing "bag man" George "Buggy" Stumpf and a talk by Paul Wolter from the Sauk County Historical Society, attendees



Bryan Greene presented his research on British performer and show owner Pablo Fanque. photo by Donna Lee Dicksson

were set free to dine on their own in one of the many charming establishments available in Baraboo's downtown district. Many opted to remain downtown to enjoy the music of Prof. Stich's Original Circus Band, which was moved from its outdoor location on the square to the now well-known



Pete Shrake of Circus World Museum's Robert L. Parkinson Library, Maureen Brunsdale of Illinois State University's Milner Library, Kathy Maher from the Barnum Museum, and Jennifer Lemmer Posey from The Ringling's Circus Museum update attendees about the various collections.. photo by Donna Lee Dicksson



Maureen Brunsdale, Greg Parkinson, Pete Shrake, Chris Berry, Jennifer Lemmer Posey, Kathy Maher, Michael Riley, Bryan Greene, Matt Blessing (not pictured) and Leigh Ketchum (not pictured) were the final group of presenters under the guidance of Fred Dahlinger.

photo by Ralph Pierce

Al. Ringling Mansion Ballroom due to rain.

The second day of the convention began with many attendees enjoying a quick breakfast at the Clarion Hotel before making their way back to the Ringling Mansion for another day filled with engaging presentations. The morning panel, under the guidance of Kathy Maher, Executive Director of the Barnum Museum, was initiated with presentations from two CHS Board members. Al Stencell pulled from letters in his own collection to share the story of an early seal trainer while John Polacsek traced the career of horse trainer Dennis Wagner. Keith Webb and his sister shared memories of life with their uncle C. W. Webb's Russell Bros. Circus. Next on the schedule was an update about The Ringling Museum from Executive Director Steven High, followed by a presentation by Gerard and Jeanne-Yvonne Borg who shared a beautiful selection of Buffalo Bill's Wild West images and other historic photographs included in their Circus Art Museum collection. New member Robert James Stark examined a circus that travelled to the Klondike through British Columbia in the last years of the 19th century. The morning's final presenter, Mike Moore gave insight into Tex Carson and his family's involvement in the circus.

The final session of speakers began with another new-

comer to the CHS Convention. Bryan Greene, inspired by his own love of music, investigated the real story behind the famous Beatles' song "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite," and shared some of the history of Britain's remarkable black showman, Pablo Fanque. This was followed by Kristin Lee, a Research Data Librarian at Tufts University, who found her own inspiration in the University's unique relic – the tail of Jumbo. Lee presented the work she has been doing to extrapolate information from the routing data of the Barnum & London show. Matt Blessing, State Archivist at the Wisconsin Historical Society gave the attendees an overview of the impressive new Archives Preservation Facility that the State has built in Madison. A lively panel discussion brought updates on some of the important circus collections including those at Illinois State's Milner Library, Circus World Museum, The Barnum Museum, and The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art. The session concluded with presentations from Chris Berry, Michael Riley and Leigh Ketchum about exciting upgrades to the CHS website and a word from Greg Parkinson, Editor of Bandwagon.

The evening festivities began with the recognition of Circus World Museum as the recipient of the 2018 Thayer Prize for their exceptional work in documenting and



At the banquet, Karen and Emily DeSanto prepare to reward convention organizer Fred Dahlinger for giving Emily her first performance gig many years prior, when the DeSantos first appeared at CWM.

photo by Donna Lee Dickson

sharing oral histories of Ringling performers, workers and managerial staff. Scott O'Donnell accepted the prize and acknowledged the hard work of Archivist Peter Shrake and the rest of the staff at the museum. Christian Overland, the new Ruth & Hartley Barker Director of the Wisconsin Historical Society, took a moment to introduce himself and express his sincere support of the efforts of Circus World Museum as it continues to grow its affiliation with the WHS. The night concluded with the annual banquet topped by Kathy Maher's presentation about the film *The Greatest Showman* – "Fiction vs. Fact! The REAL Story Behind the Reel Story!" The evening would not have been complete without the appropriate acknowledgement of the hard work of convention organizer Fred Dahlinger – who was rewarded for his extraordinary efforts by Karen DeSanto and her daughter Emily, who delivered a pie in his face!

The July 21 blow off for the convention began with Baraboo's magnificent Big Top Parade and Circus Festival. While rain had been feared, the morning was beautiful, and crowds thrilled at elephants, bands and, of course, the beautiful circus wagons rolling down the streets of the town. The afternoon was free for visiting the museum or any number of other historic circus sites. The most dedicated of CHS members spent their afternoon bidding on treasures of circus history at the benefit auction, which raised nearly \$8,000

for our organization.

That evening concluded with a screening of an excerpt out of the PBS American Experience four-hour documentary, *The Circus*, which will debut this October. Fred Pfening III, Fred Dahlinger, Janet Davis and Sakina Hughes made up the panel of contributors that joined producer Sharon Grimberg for a brief discussion moderated by Scott O'Donnell after the preview. The majestic setting of the Al. Ringling Theatre was a fitting setting for the epic images edited together for this documentary.

In every way, the 2018 convention met and exceeded expectations. An extraordinary slate of speakers respectfully kept to their time, allowing everyone to share their research. More than 140 attendees filled the Al. Ringling Mansion Ballroom, including 17 new CHS members. Overall the convention netted a profit of nearly \$14,000, but more importantly,

it brought together what was most certainly the most diverse range of circus historians we have ever seen.

The foundation for the event was provided by Joe and Carmen Colossa and Don Horowitz, who graciously volunteered the gratis use of the palatial Al. Ringling Mansion Ballroom to serve as the primary convention venue. Their support was complemented by Paul Wolter, Executive Director of the Sauk County Historical Society, a local historian who provided three distinctly special events for registrants. The owners of the Salome Ringling Home (Brett Goertmoeller) and the Charles Ringling Mansion (Stuart Koehler and Julie Hearley) kindly allowed ticket buyers to tour these seldom-seen quarters.

The convention successfully conveyed two very important messages – that the future of circus history is ensured through the strength and vision of the organizations that are working together to preserve the legacy of the circus and that the auspices of the Circus Historical Society are flexible enough to bring together the passion and knowledge of a seasoned group of historians with the enthusiasm and interest of a new generation who have recognized the importance of preserving the stories of the circus. These important points were expertly shaped by Fred Dahlinger who deserves our thanks for putting together such a wonderful convention. **BW**



The Al. Ringling Theatre was a magnificent setting for the preview of the American Experience documentary *The Circus* after which Scott O'Donnell presided over a panel discussion with producer Sharon Grimberg and historians Fred Pfening III, Janet Davis, Sakina Hughes, and Fred Dahlinger.



About the author

Jennifer Lemmer Posey is Tibbals Curator of Circus at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art. With interests in the history and art of circus posters, costumes, and the relationship of the circus arts and popular culture, she has contributed to numerous publications including *The American Circus* (2012) and *The Amazing American Circus Poster* (2011). Her writings on circus topics have also been published in such journals as *Early Popular Visual Culture*, *Bandwagon*, and the international magazine *Planet Circus*. From 2013 to 2017, she served as editor for *Bandwagon*. Most recently, Jennifer served as an Advisory Scholar for the 2017 Smithsonian Folklife Festival celebrating the Circus Arts. She lives in Sarasota with her husband and three children.



Parade wagons from the Circus World Museum collection including the Ringling Bros. United States Tableau rolled down the streets of Baraboo as part of the city's celebration of the circus.

photo by Donna Lee Dicksson

The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe Restoration Completed

This past summer when thousands of people gathered in the streets of Baraboo to watch the Big Top Circus Parade, they also witnessed the inaugural parade of the newly restored The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe. After three years of painstaking work, the float with its gold leaf finish gleamed in the July sun awing spectators as it made its way through town.

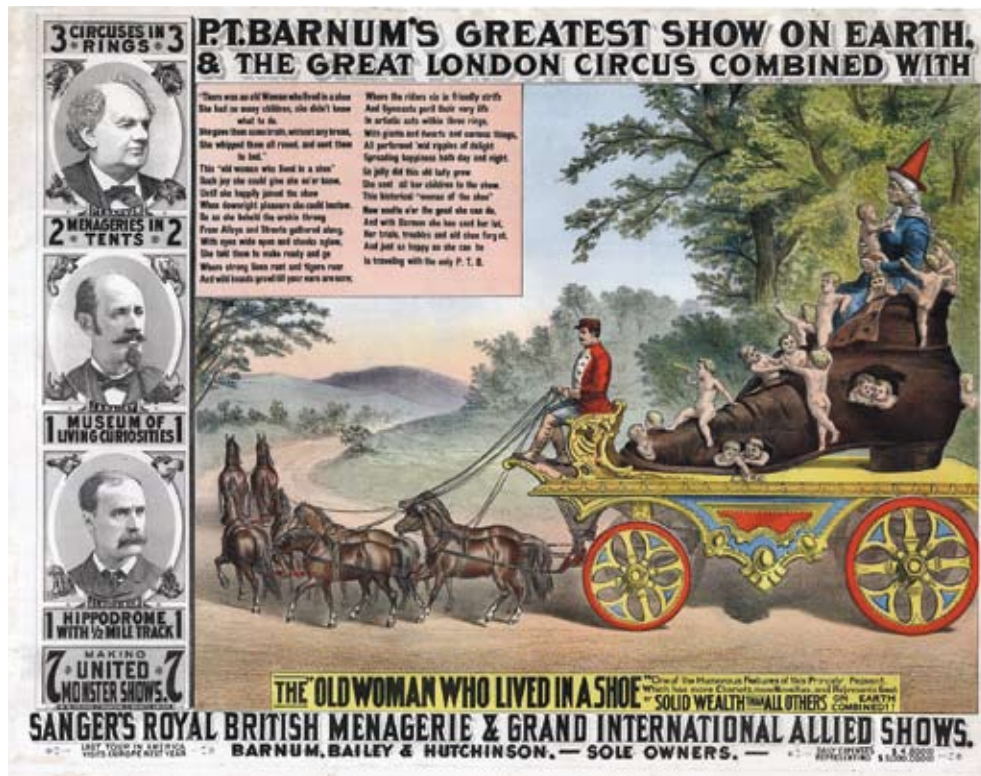
The wagon was one of the earliest acquisitions of the museum, donated in 1954 when the museum was still in the developmental stages. One of three surviving fairy tale floats built for the Barnum & London Circus in the early 1880s, The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe was the last to receive a full restoration treatment at the museum.

The restoration was a team effort led by Circus World's veteran wagon restoration expert Harold "Heavy" Burdick. With the help of numerous volunteers including Bernie Hotzel, Willie Pansegro and Virgil Kasper, the project began in the summer of 2015 when layer upon layer of paint was removed from the 132-year old carved timbers. Along



The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe made its first public appearance in the Baraboo Big Top Parade in July following its restoration at Circus World Museum.

Mary Hultman



P. T. Barnum, James A. Bailey and J. L. Hutchinson were the proprietors of the Barnum & London Circus in 1882 when this one sheet lithograph was printed advertising the show's new fairytale float.

Circus World Museum

the way, Burdick evaluated the condition of the vehicle and carvings. "The wagon sort of tells you how things need to progress to get the work done. It's logical, but you have to listen to the wagon, because it will tell you which direction to go."

Once the wagon was stripped of its paint, the museum brought in the talents of the expert wood sculptor Homer Deahn who restored the carvings. As Deahn completed his work, Burdick researched the undercarriage and had a new undercarriage fabricated by Amish artisans in Indiana to match the original design as closely as possible. Photographic evidence had suggested that design had been problematic and seasonal wear and tear had resulted in periodic modifications to the undercarriage. A half century of seasonal use also had an adverse impact on the wooden body of the float. "There were a lot of patches and poorly executed repairs on this old girl," said Burdick, "but remember this wagon was traveling every day, so things had to be done quickly with whatever they had on hand so the show could keep rolling."

Once the body of the wagon was completed and reassembled on its new carriage, Joan Stevens, a local sign painter and artist who has worked on a number of museum wagons, painted all of the red pin striping and applied the gold leaf finish.

The project was funded entirely through a generous grant from the museum's friends group, Circus World Museum Inc. **BW**

— Pete Shrake and Dave SaLoutos, Circus World Museum

King of the Sideshow

Ward Hall 1930-2018

Ward Hall frequently said that he was preordained for his career, often telling the story about a very cold day during The Great Depression when his mother gave him a blanket to keep warm in their drafty Nebraska home. Although he was only three or four years old, he took the blanket and put it over the back of two chairs and began playing in his “big top.” At that tender age, young Ward Hall had yet to see a circus. Although his family was puzzled that he even knew what a circus tent was, years later Ward said it was his destiny and he believed the mold had been cast even before he ever saw the bright lights of a midway, smelled the pungent aroma of a menagerie or tasted cotton candy.

In the years that followed Ward Hall developed an interest in magic and dreamed of being a circus performer. During the labor shortages of World War II, he was hired at the age of 14 as a prop boy for Cole Bros., a position that only lasted a few days. The next winter however, while reading *The Billboard*, he spotted an advertisement for a magician and fire-eater on the Dailey Bros. sideshow. Ward applied for the position and was hired, although he did not tell the sideshow manager, Milt Robbins, that he was only 15 years old and did not actually know how to eat fire.

That same confidence and tenacity took Ward Hall from Dailey Bros. to several small truck circuses of the 1940s and 1950s including Rogers Bros., Seal Bros., Wallace & Clark and Stevens Bros. While still in his late teens and early 20s, Ward and his first partner Harry Leonard began managing the sideshows on those small circuses. Although they performed a variety of acts including ventriloquism, knife-throwing and fire-eating, Hall and Leonard soon realized that the pitch items they sold at the conclusion of their act generated more money than their meager salaries.

Ward would often say that when he and Leonard went into business with their first sideshow in 1951, there were 104 similar shows on carnivals and circuses in the United States. In recent years, he would add that his *World of Wonders* show, owned with his partner Chris Christ, was the last of its kind.

Ward Hall, the “King of the Sideshow” died on August 31, 2018 at the age of 88. He spent 72 years on circuses and carnivals, receiving many honors along the way, including election to the Hall of Fame for both the Outdoor Amusement Business Association and the International Independent Showman’s Association. In 2011 he was inducted into Sarasota’s Circus Ring of Fame.

Despite the formal honors and awards that Ward Hall achieved over the years, the man who *Life* magazine called “Ziegfeld of the Cornfield” will be remembered by those who knew him as a gentleman and an icon. He was the last of the great outdoor showmen.

Ward Hall was a friend and mentor to many who shared his interests and passion, and for 40 years he was an active member of the Circus Historical Society, joining in 1978. Over the years, CHS was fortunate to host him as an honored guest and speaker at several conventions, where he regaled us with tales of events that happened decades before, told by the master showman with well-timed punchlines and uncanny accuracy.

On the night that Ward Hall died, his *World of Wonders* sideshow opened on time at the Cumberland County Fair in Fayetteville, North Carolina. His friends said he would have been proud of that. In fact, they said he would have expected it. **BW**

– Chris Berry



Richard Flint



Fred D. Pfening Archive



Circus Historical Society

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